

Reconstructing the Middle Ages

Reconstructing the Middle Ages:
Gaston Paris and the Development
of Nineteenth-century Medievalism

By

Isabel DiVanna

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P U B L I S H I N G

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FOR JOE AND LEO

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Isabel DiVanna
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PREFACE

Gaston Paris is one of the main names of nineteenth-century French medievalism. A controversial scholar, known for his sometimes romantic, sometimes positivistic approach to medieval literature, Paris was one of the academics responsible for introducing medieval studies as a professional discipline in Paris in the period 1860–70. Although some of his contribution is now rightly seen as an element of the history of historiography, in modern medieval studies and books by today's historians and literary critics, it is still possible to see many instances of the influence left by Gaston Paris and his generation. More importantly, the nationalistic imprint left by Gaston Paris's generation on medieval studies can be seen in modern studies in medievalism throughout Europe. The importance of memory, nationhood and identity makes Gaston Paris's work, produced in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1, a fundamental reading for those trying to understand the political conflicts of the early twentieth century, *revanchisme* and nationalism in their many varieties.

The nature and development of nineteenth-century medieval studies is of interest to scholars for several reasons. First, one becomes acquainted with the paradoxical character of nineteenth-century medievalism concerning methodology and theory. Second, looking at nineteenth-century medievalism enables one to identify the instances in which its legacy to later generations was also paradoxical and filled with duplicity. Third, when approaching nineteenth-century medievalism, we are faced with the efforts of scholars and academics in general in the second half of the nineteenth century to restore and, ultimately if not consciously, to recreate the French national past. Fourth, since the early 1900s, the work of nineteenth-century medievalists has been regarded as having established a body of solid evidence for medieval studies. For example, if a modern scholar decided to produce an edition of *La chanson de Roland*, he or she would inevitably use a nineteenth-century edition/translation as a guide. It is also likely that the dictionary to be used would be one that either was produced in the nineteenth century, or was based on a nineteenth-century dictionary/grammar; the historical context of *La chanson de Roland* is now almost commonplace because it was so well popularised from 1850 to 1900. Nineteenth-century scholars, often criticised by modern scholars,

were the first to make sense of medieval texts and to suggest the historical context which they describe and in which they were written. As such, we are still living with their intellectual legacy.

Interest in late nineteenth-century medievalism can be said to have started in North America in the 1980s and 90s, where a number of scholars from language departments of Ivy League universities like Berkley, Harvard, Yale and Johns Hopkins brought postmodernist approaches to the study of the history of history-writing in the nineteenth century.¹ Credit must be given to them for proving that an investigation of the work of late nineteenth-century medievalists was desirable as a means to understand modern medieval studies. Gaston Paris became, as an object of academic investigation, more popular than ever before in the years 2000–03, as scholars celebrated the 100 years since his death (in 2003). The *Revue des langues romanes* devoted an entire issue to him in 2002. Likewise, Michel Zink organised a colloquium about Gaston Paris's medievalism in Paris in 2003, a volume of conference proceedings being published the following year.² A younger generation of academics started their career in the early twentieth century by re-examining Gaston Paris's philological approach and offering an elegant intellectual biography of Gaston Paris and his most famous student, Joseph Bédier.³ Both groups, the so-called North American "new medievalists" and the new generation of European philologists and literary critics, have looked at the work of Gaston Paris and his contemporaries from the perspective of what it can tell us about our own modern-day practices, in terms of literary and philological analysis and criticism, and our current understanding of science and its role in society.

Without wishing to diminish the value of work produced in the past two decades on Gaston Paris, I am more interested in following a historian's approach to Gaston Paris's work in order to understand what his work and that of his colleagues tell us about late nineteenth-century medievalism at a time when academic studies and nationalism crossed

¹ For example, Howard Bloch, Stephen Nichols, Lee Patterson, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, David Hult and many others.

² Zink, ed. *Le moyen âge de Gaston Paris*, with articles by Bähler, Nichols, Gumbrecht, Corbellari, Ridoux, Gasparini and many other experts on Gaston Paris.

³ For example, Ursula Bähler, Alain Corbellari, Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet and Philippa Kim. While Bähler's book on Paris is well researched, offering a great variety of archival material about Gaston Paris, there is less analysis of his ideas and how his theories intertwined with a cultural-political discourse in late nineteenth-century France.

paths in ways that have yet to be fully understood.⁴ A few scholars have attempted to solve the puzzle of late nineteenth-century historians and their particular methodology,⁵ but they have paid little attention to the importance of medievalism in the late nineteenth century. Likewise, those who have focused on medieval studies paid less attention than one might have wished to the actual methodology used by scholars like Gaston Paris⁶ and to the possibilities of a comparison between the methods of historians and literary critics and philologists in late nineteenth-century France. While it would be a great achievement to accomplish both (an examination of the method of philologists and literary critics in late nineteenth-century France *and* a comparison with the methodology of historians and sociologists at the same time period), the aim of this book is more modest. Here, I will simply re-evaluate the importance of understanding Gaston Paris's methodology by looking at his work on three medieval literary genres: the epic, the *fabliaux* and the poems and novels of the Arthurian cycle.⁷ Choosing an approach based on Gaston Paris's own theories about these literary genres (starting with what scholarly work influenced Paris, then how he created his own hypotheses based on new methods of scholarship, how he tested them on each literary genre, and finally what criticism his theories received) seems to me to be a profitable way to understand his ideas without, as previous scholarly work on Paris has done, forgetting that theory and methodology need to be assessed by looking at the object of investigation as well as the primary elements of theoretical knowledge.

This book focuses on the context, characteristics, methods and most prominent figures of late nineteenth-century medievalism. Chapter One offers a review of the legacy of nineteenth-century scholars that is passed on to modern medieval studies. Chapters Two to Four each outline one particular aspect of the legacy of nineteenth-century medievalism for modern studies of medieval literature via an analysis of scholarly work produced by Gaston Paris about the epic, the *fabliaux* and the tales of the

⁴ Excellent work has been done by Digeon in the classic *La crise allemande de la pensée française*, and by Berger, Donovan and Passmore in *Writing national histories*, for example.

⁵ See, for example, Carbonell, *Histoire et historiens* and Pim den Boer, *History as a profession*.

⁶ Ridoux's *Évolution des études médiévales en France* contains very little about this issue, which he considered briefly in "La carrière et la personnalité scientifique de Gaston Paris," and left one hoping for further considerations.

⁷ For an examination of the work of historians in late nineteenth-century France, see DiVanna, *Writing history in the Third Republic*.

Arthurian cycle. Chapter Two looks at Paris's claim that epics were "poems without a poet," meaning that epic poems were not produced by an individual, but by the collective work and memory of the people of a nation. Chapter Three discusses *fabliaux* as "poems without poetics," alluding to Paris's claim that the *fabliaux* were written in transparent language and mirrored day-to-day life. Chapter Four examines Arthurian poems as "poetics without a poem," in reference to Gaston Paris's criticisms of Paulin Paris's long-held idea that the first Arthurian tales were actually prose ones, and that the poetic texts of the troubadours came later. Throughout the book, I will keep in mind Gaston Paris's claims of an unbiased analysis, guided only by scientism, to reassess the validity of these claims as well as the validity of any claims of objectivity in historical studies. While I acknowledge the work of scholars in the 1970s, who have done much to discredit the usefulness of labels such as "positivistic" and "romantic" to understanding the work of late nineteenth-century historians,⁸ I nevertheless disagree with much of what they argued. I will show how the use of these labels was not simply a rhetorical device, nor a misunderstanding of one or another epistemological project.⁹ Neither were they simple misconceptions about the work of nineteenth-century medievalists with origins impossible to trace.¹⁰ Rather, in emphasising the use of a certain methodology that they interchangeably called "*philologique*," "*scientifique*" and/or "*positive*"¹¹ and contrasting it with a different set of guidelines which they themselves named "*romantique*," late nineteenth-century scholars reconstructed the history of their own discipline while recreating the French medieval past. This is the most crucial, and yet least understood, aspect of nineteenth-century medievalism, and it is safe to say that medieval studies would not have gained the impetus they received in 1860s France without the label of "scientific" studies and the development of a number of methodological practices.

In order to avoid confusion, I will refer to Gaston Paris's method as "scientific-positivistic" and "philological" interchangeably as scholars at

⁸ Such as Carbonell (with *Histoire et historiens*) and Keylor (with *Academy and community*).

⁹ See the articles by Gaulmier and Carbonell in *Romantisme. Le(s) positivesme(s)*.

¹⁰ Which seems to be Bähler's argument when she sets out to defend Gaston Paris's work from four common misconceptions to his approach without actually identifying the source of the misconception (see Bähler, "Gaston Paris et la philologie romane," 13–40).

¹¹ As we will see, they used different denominations for their methodology in different decades.

the time did, and use the contrasting label of “romantic” to works and approaches which would have received that name in the same period. What I understand by these labels is that a romantic methodology was one which, according to nineteenth-century scholars, followed a non-scientific process of deduction and reasoning, being, therefore, highly subjective. Romantic scholars, as they were called, were more likely to proceed to a literary than a philological analysis, and their work was very often seen as politically biased. Their understanding of what science meant and what its role was in French society was viewed as fragmentary, and although they attempted to explain cultural, social and political phenomena rationally, they were unsuccessful in doing so.

In contrast to this, the philological or scientific-positivistic approach was one which followed the new German theories about linguistics and philology and French positivism (meaning the use of the law of three stages, the need for an observation-based approach to human sciences, and the existence of positive knowledge at which one arrives through empirical means). Unlike a romantic approach, the scientific-positivistic approach offered the possibility of inductive analysis, which was thought to be less open to subjective considerations. The quest for the origins of texts and their component elements—linguistic, stylistic and plot-related—was preferred, and any political or religious bias was seen negatively. The idea of the evolution of the human spirit and yet a belief in the continuity of institutions and the cultural components of a people was part of the scientific-positivistic approach, alongside a comparative intent and the use of human sciences in the re-evaluation of the nation’s role and place in Europe. The creation of a unitary science, as in the Comtean positivistic programme, was popular among these scholars.

While presenting the work of Gaston Paris as representative of nineteenth-century scholarship, I will highlight the elements, concepts, theories or hypotheses which Paris created that can still be found in modern medieval studies, and analyse the responses of scholars in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century to Paris’s work. The book offers examples of the use of these concepts or theories in modern works and concludes with an assessment of the effectiveness of new medievalism as a project for medieval studies both in its views of nineteenth-century works and of medieval works themselves. The aim is to provide a criticism of nineteenth-century medievalism, but also—although to a smaller extent—of the medievalism of today.

Throughout this book, it becomes clear that the matter of nineteenth-century medievalism is not one which should solely interest literary critics, historians and those concerned with medievalism in its strictest sense.

Rather, nineteenth-century French medievalism is a topic which involves discussion about identity, the construction of the self-image of France before relations with Germany became hostile and especially as a result of the war with the Prussian Empire, as well as memory and modern views of nationhood. Issues such as race, gender and academic warfare are addressed here to create an image of late nineteenth-century France as a nation in which scholars as well as citizens were coming to terms with one fact: that the modernisation of France and its positioning in Europe against England, Germany and Italy meant that the only way to project the future of the nation was to look at her past. If one could not change that which has been, one could surely highlight the glorious elements which constituted it and construct (even if involuntarily) a past of which to be proud.

CHAPTER ONE

HAVE WE BEEN HERE BEFORE? THE MEDIEVALISMS OF THEN AND NOW

Il y avait cependant quelque chose dans l'air, quelque chose de subtil et d'inconnu, une atmosphère étrangère intolérable, comme une odeur répandue, l'odeur d'invasion. Elle emplissait les demeures et les places publiques, changeait le goût des aliments, donnait l'impression d'être en voyage, très loin, chez des tribus barbares et dangereuses.¹

The publication of medieval records in France under government auspices attained a level of quality in the nineteenth century somewhere between the consistent professionalism of the Germans and the idiosyncratic amateurism of the English.²

Introducing Medievalism

Medievalism is one area of study that has attracted increasing attention since the late 1970s, culminating in a great production of texts in this field in the 1980s and 90s. Broadly defined, medieval studies have long sought to examine medieval history, culture, economics, politics, art and literature, philology and philosophy. On the other hand, medievalism can be defined as the study of the history of medieval studies, or the investigation of the ways in which scholars and philosophers have constructed an image of the Middle Ages since the sixteenth century. In this sense, it is possible to see medieval studies as an empirical field of historical and literary studies, whereas medievalism concentrates on theoretical aspects of medieval studies, such as motivation, objectives, methodology and the results of these studies for the general understanding of the Middle Ages as a period of history.

As an academic discipline, medieval studies were born in nineteenth-century Europe as part of a movement of growing emphasis on all human

¹ Maupassant, *Boule de suif et autres contes de la guerre* [1880], 53

² Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, 33.

sciences and criticism (literary, textual and historical), in both France and Germany.³ A similar development of academic institutions, chairs and the growth of medievalism happened in Germany, France and then England. The French scenario is of course most relevant to Gaston Paris's views on medievalism, although the development of medieval studies in Germany also influenced his work and the work of other French historians, literary critics and philologists.

Historical and medieval studies gained great impetus in nineteenth-century France. In 1821, the Bourbon government founded the *École des chartes* with the purpose of stimulating critical historical research. This first effort was followed by the creation of a chair of Medieval French Language and Literature at the Collège de France in 1853, under the auspices of Hippolyte Fortoul, Louis Napoleon's minister of education. In 1860, a chair of Romance philology was created at Strasbourg University. The Collège de France separated the disciplines of history and geography from the other fields of humanities in 1869.⁴ In the late 1860s and 1870s, the government funded the creation of several institutions of higher education, such as the *École pratique des hautes études*, founded by Victor Duruy in 1868, one of the colleges where Gaston Paris was to teach Old French.⁵ These were just some of the many institutions created in the mid- and late nineteenth century with the purpose of promoting higher education in the field of humanities, including the emerging discipline of medieval studies.

The creation of the first chair of French medieval literature in Paris in 1853 symbolised this growing interest in historical studies, especially of the medieval period. From the 1850s, medieval studies became more and more professional, in the sense that they were now regarded as best carried out within the walls of academic institutions. The work of previous generations of scholars and researchers of the medieval period then came to be seen as pre-professional. With some notable exceptions, work produced between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries had been highly derogatory of the medieval period, and the image of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages prevailed until the early nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, however, the Middle Ages emerged as the national muse, the point of formation of the French character, the most important period in French history. How did this happen, and why?

³ For general information, see Belis, *La critique française à la fin du XIXe siècle*; Berg, *La querelle des critiques en France à la fin du XIXe siècle*.

⁴ Monod, "La chaire d'histoire au Collège de France," 242–5.

⁵ Dakyns, *The Middle Ages in French literature 1851–1900*, 37.

During the late eighteenth century, studies of the Middle Ages fell into two categories: first, the unflattering texts by Enlightenment philosophers who viewed the Middle Ages as, at most, a necessary step in the human path to progress and happiness; and second, antiquarian works, such as those of Saint-Palaye,⁶ Papon⁷ and Le Grand d'Aussy.⁸ What characterised these antiquarian works was the lack of an explicit methodology for dealing with their object, which, to us, makes these authors' texts seem merely a chaotic summary of documents or literary texts.⁹ The legacy of antiquarian historians can be seen clearly in early nineteenth-century medieval studies, but progressively disappeared during the period 1830–50. Scientific-positivistic scholars of the late nineteenth century considered that the antiquarian legacy had been completely superseded in the 1870s and 80s, the era of self-proclaimed scientific approaches to medieval themes.

As noted above, as a professional academic discipline, French medieval studies were born in the 1800s. The birth of medieval studies was not, however, itself an object of study until the late twentieth century. In the 1980s, scholars such as Howard Bloch, Stephen Nichols, Kevin Brownlee and others started a movement in North America which they themselves called New Medievalism.¹⁰ Their purpose was to review the roots of medieval studies as an academic discipline, looking back at the period 1850–80 as that of the institutionalisation of medieval studies and the birth of medievalism. Coming from a consciously postmodern perspective, the new medievalists claimed that in understanding where medieval studies came from, they could comprehend where they now stand and where they will develop in future. For them, nineteenth-century medievalists, viewing medieval studies as a means both of knowing the past better and reinforcing traditional French values (such as loyalty, courage, religion), were not only changing the sense of medieval texts, but also reinventing their own France, and since then medievalism has been, to a great extent, linked with the idea of restoring a lost past.

Emphasising the birth of medieval studies as a part of the rise of modernity in the late 1800s, Bloch and Nichols highlighted the influence of nineteenth-century polemics and debates about literature and history on modern medieval studies. New medievalist scholars have thus produced a

⁶ Sainte-Palaye, *Mémoires sur l'ancienne chevalerie*.

⁷ Papon, *Voyage littéraire de Provence*.

⁸ Le Grand d'Aussy, *Fabliaux ou contes du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle*.

⁹ Glencross, "La matière de Bretagne dans l'érudition française à l'époque romantique," 95–105, and *Reconstructing Camelot*, 50–5.

¹⁰ Brownlee et al, eds. *The new medievalism*, 1–15.

number of studies of nineteenth-century savants, such as Gaston Paris, Ferdinand Brunetière and Joseph Bédier. Their work interests us here because of their characterisation of late nineteenth-century medievalism in terms of an emphasis on historical analysis based on documentary research and philology, a belief in the transparency of language, and nationalism as a key influence on the views of scholars of the period. Each of these themes will be examined in detail below in order to offer an assessment of new medievalist views of nineteenth-century medievalism.

The very idea that a medievalism can be “new” requires further explanation, although this is not an easy task for several reasons. The medievalism of Gaston Paris and his school of innovative thinkers was, at its time, also new. In order to proceed to a comparison between two new medievalisms roughly 100 years apart, one is quickly faced with a severe crisis of conscience and belief. In order to understand medieval studies in the 1870s, it is crucial to remember that scholars of that period viewed their task as that of reaching the true Middle Ages, not merely producing a representation of it. If scholars today are aware of the impossibility of truly knowing a historical period and tend to see their work as an attempt to recreate it with the aid of existing sources, nineteenth-century scholars had a different attitude. This makes it rather complex for us to assess nineteenth-century scholars’ work on the Middle Ages as it was based on different grounds from our own. Of course, as historians, we can move past this first difficulty and invoke all the elements of historicism to keep nineteenth-century medievalism quite apart from modern medievalism.

Another reason why our task to understand nineteenth-century medievalism as viewed by modern scholars is made harder is that the founders of the project of new medievalism in late nineteenth-century France never clearly defined the objectives of their studies, even though they constantly emphasised the significance of their work. The third difficulty is that modern-day new medievalism incorporates most fields of historical studies devoted to the Middle Ages, such as geo-history, psychological history, art and literary history, philological studies, cultural and social studies, to mention just a few, making some of its texts quite specialised and difficult to assess. Each separate field seems to have one thing in common: the claim that a modern approach to medieval studies cannot be separated from an extensive understanding of where medieval studies came from, how and why they were founded, and the personalities of their founders.

North American new medievalists of the 1980s approached these problems in a fascinating way. In fact, rather than shedding light on late nineteenth-century medievalism, they somehow made it even more

obscure than it already was. One only has to have a good look at the two bibles of new medievalism (Bloch and Nichols' *Medievalism and the modernist temper* and Brownlee et al.'s *The new medievalism*) to be sure to understand slightly less about Gaston Paris and his fellow scholars than ever before. With a complicated neo-historicist, postmodernist approach and a tendency to overemphasise discourse where discourse was not necessarily used, new medievalists intentionally or subconsciously (one should interpret it as one must) decided to keep readers in the dark. Instead of focusing on the nineteenth-century historians' method and trying to understand it within the context of their own discipline and the historical context in which they lived, the new medievalists resorted to psychology, psychoanalysis and a wide variety of ancillary sciences to avoid approaching the real problem of nineteenth-century medievalism, namely the reliance on a particular methodology which did not quite fall into the category of scientific-positivistic in spite of scholars' own aims. In fact, nineteenth-century studies of medieval history and literature used contradictory, even opposing elements in their methodological core. Making use of elements of what was then called "romanticism" alongside what was called "positivism," Gaston Paris and his fellow medievalists developed a medievalism which can only be understood by looking at the intellectual context in which it was born, as opposed to predominantly discussing intentionality and discourse. More than this, the medievalism of Gaston Paris and his colleagues can only be appreciated if one looks at the method used to produce knowledge of the French Middle Ages in relation to a wider system of thought in late nineteenth-century France.

Introducing Gaston Paris

Choosing Gaston Paris as the man responsible for the development of nineteenth-century French medievalism is not necessarily an original task. As noted above, the hundredth anniversary of the death of Gaston Paris in 1903 brought increased awareness to the subject.¹¹ It so happens that Gaston Paris is one of the most prolific French scholars of all times, founder of two particularly important journals of French history and literary studies, and by far the most well known of all late nineteenth-century French medievalists. In spite of this, work on Gaston Paris and late nineteenth-century medievalists thus far has mostly been done by literary critics and philologists, and, as a result, the questions they uncovered about Gaston Paris as a literary critic and a philologist point to a gap in the

¹¹ Zink, ed. *Le moyen âge de Gaston Paris*.

understanding of Gaston Paris in his historical context and of his work in terms of the history of historiography. This is precisely what this book will try to do: understand Gaston Paris's work in context and recognize his contribution as representative of a certain understanding of what history meant, who it was for, and how it should be done.

Gaston Bruno Paulin Paris (1839–1903) was the only son of Pauline and Paulin Paris (1800–81). Paulin Paris was an archivist and librarian who, in the 1830s, pioneered in Paris a movement of bringing awareness to medieval French texts. As his father's son, Gaston dedicated his life to the humanities. When he was 18 years old, he graduated from the Collège Rollin, where he studied Classics. In 1856, his father sent the young Paris to Germany so that he could learn the language and the methods of Germanic research.¹² When Gaston returned to France, he completed his *maîtrise* with the thesis *Étude sur le rôle de l'accent latin dans la langue française*.¹³ In 1865, he completed his *doctorat* following the requirement of producing two theses: *Chronique du Faux-Turpin* (in Latin) and *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne* (in French). The latter won him the Prix Gobert, being acclaimed as the first work of French literary criticism to use historical methods of comparative analysis. Later, Paris produced his edition of *La vie de Saint Alexis* based on German philologist Karl Lachmann's editing methods, which also won the Prix Gobert (1871). He did not write any monographs and indeed he only published three books after 1871, all of them collections of his own articles and lecture transcripts.

In 1872, Gaston replaced his father as lecturer of the chair of French language and literature at the Collège de France, where he taught until 1902. He was a successful lecturer and writer. He had so many functions in major Parisian academic institutions and institutes of higher education that it is not surprising that he married quite late in life, in 1885, when he was 46 years old. His first wife, Marie Paris, died four years later. In 1891, Paris married Marguerite Savary, with whom he had one daughter, Marguerite.¹⁴ He died suddenly of a heart attack in 1903. Paris's theories on medieval studies, especially his work on medieval literature, have been

¹² Bloch, "Mieux vaut jamais que tard," 68–9.

¹³ Paris, *Étude sur le rôle de l'accent latin dans la langue française*.

¹⁴ Meyer, "Funérailles de M. Gaston Paris" in *Bulletin historique et philologique du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques*; Monod, "Nécrologue: Gaston Paris"; Romero, ed. "Gaston Paris" in *Epistolario de Rufino José Cuervo con Alfred Morel-Fatio*; Ker, "A great French scholar," 101–12.

the focus of several short articles by medievalists¹⁵ who seek to understand how medieval studies were created and to what extent nineteenth-century theories and methods still influence medieval studies today.¹⁶

Paris's life was dedicated to medieval studies. He produced over one thousand works, among which are many articles, a few books, a large number of book reviews and some lecture transcripts. He developed theories on the epic, the *fabliaux*, the Arthurian romance, moralising literature, saints' lives, and studied French, Italian, Portuguese, English, Germanic, Hungarian, Danish and Indian literature in several periods of history. He founded the journals *Romania* and *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature* and collaborated on several others. Paris was also responsible for the creation and popularisation of concepts and theories, such as *amour courtois*, the Indian origin of the *fabliaux* and the Celtic origin of the Tristan tales, which are still known to most scholars in the field of medieval studies and literary studies in general.

Earlier on, I mentioned that one of the reasons why the new medievalists examine Gaston Paris and scholars of his generation is because they are said to have both founded medieval studies in France and imprinted particular characteristics to these studies. It is important to note that the work of Gaston Paris was never systematically approached before the 1980s (a few footnotes about his definition of *amour courtois* are the only pre-1980 references to be found).¹⁷ Before then, no special attention was given to him or his contribution to medieval studies. Since this

¹⁵ See, for example, Gumbrecht, "Un souffle d'Allemagne ayant passé," 1–37; Kelly, "The varieties of love in medieval literature according to Gaston Paris," 301–27; Aarsleff, "Scholarship and ideology," 93–113; Bähler, "Notes sur l'acception du terme de philologie romane chez Gaston Paris," 23–40; Camille, "Philological iconoclasm," 192–224; Hult, "Gaston Paris and the invention of courtly love," 371–401; Bloch, "Naturalisme, nationalisme, médiévisme," 62–87; Bloch, "Mieux vaut jamais que tard," 64–86; Brownlee et al, eds. *The new medievalism*; Cerquiglini, *Éloge de la variante*.

¹⁶ Bähler started her book on Gaston Paris by proceeding to a fascinating analysis of Paris's description on his passport versus his own self-image as he "corrected" the data as per the police archivist (see her *Gaston Paris et la philologie romane*, 27–310). As interesting as this sort of analysis can prove, here I focused not on private papers and letters of Gaston Paris, but rather on his printed work to understand the image of the Middle Ages and medievalism that he helped create in late nineteenth-century France.

¹⁷ See the three classic pre-1980 works on medievalism: Doolittle, *The relations between literature and mediaeval studies in France from 1820 to 1860*; Dakyns, *The Middle Ages in French literature*; Stock, "The Middle Ages as subject and object," 527–47.

increased interest in Gaston Paris seems to have started with new medievalism, I will analyse three main issues. The first issue concentrates on the methods of nineteenth-century scholars and the ways in which they influenced and continue to influence medieval studies. The second issue is that of new medievalism, that is, how and why scholars of the past few decades decided to approach late nineteenth-century medievalism, the conclusions at which they arrive, and how valid these conclusions are. Third, I will point to the necessarily intricate and yet fundamentally contextual, important elements of late nineteenth-century France and the correlation of the development of medieval studies at the time with the particular political and intellectual changes happening in France before and after 1870.

My chief concern in this introductory chapter is to outline Gaston Paris's general method and intellectual context, and identify the main claims of modern scholars about Gaston Paris and nineteenth-century medievalism. The strengths and weaknesses of these claims will be assessed in Chapters Two to Four on Paris's work on the epic, the *fabliaux* and the Arthurian cycle, where I turn to Paris's published writings to verify if he practised what he preached in terms of methodology, and to show the claims in which in spite of himself he failed to follow a rigorous methodology that he would have considered scientific-positivistic.

Gaston Paris's Medievalism

Despite the huge range of topics covered by Gaston Paris's publications, his work was given a unity by his desire to make French medieval studies more scientific. For Paris, the most important lesson that he had learned during his stay in Germany was that historical and literary studies needed to have a clear and well-defined methodology. For him, academic studies should not be based on subjective feelings; rather, they needed to be objective, and in order to be objective, they had to be based on primary sources. Whether these sources were fictional texts or historical/archival documents was of no importance; what was important was the method used to analyse and make sense of these sources.

While in Germany, Paris was exposed to the theories of several of the great German theorists of historical and literary studies, such as Curtius and Diez. He also studied Ranke, Kant, Wolf, Lachmann and the Brothers Grimm. He gathered from Ranke that history had to be based on a critical

assessment of the primary sources.¹⁸ From Kant he learned to be suspicious of metaphysics as a foundation for knowledge.¹⁹ From Wolf and Lachmann he learned methods of editing texts and how to establish whether a work such as the *Iliad*, the *Nibelungenlied* or *Roland* had been written by one poet or by a group of people.²⁰ Finally, from the Brothers Grimm he learned the importance of popular culture and literature in understanding a nation's past.²¹ Relying on these scholars as the source of a new, scientific or philological approach to medieval literature, Gaston Paris became the French herald of a new order of medieval studies which would bring greatness to France.

Back in France in the 1860s, Paris was confronted with a problem that was then common to all scholars in the field of the humanities. How could he ensure that the work produced on medieval themes was scientific by Germanic standards? Science, for Paris, was indivisible, as he shared a commonly held view about the unity of science.²² The first step that Paris identified for unified scientific work was that of finding a primary source.²³ This was vital because, in his opinion (in which Ranke's influence can clearly be seen), only primary sources were trustworthy. But there was still another problem: of all the versions of a primary source of a poem (for example of *Tristan et Iseut*), how could scholars identify the oldest, the original poem? The only possible way seemed to be by using philology and adopting Lachmann's method of developing a genealogical tree of manuscripts.²⁴ Lachmann had claimed that if one took a poem and compared it to other versions of it, one would certainly find discrepancies in the narrative, which would then allow the identification of the original poem (the simplest one) and the later versions of it (the more complex ones). In theory, this was a straightforward issue: it was a matter of identifying manuscripts that were alike and attributing them to a family of manuscripts. Once the oldest surviving manuscript was found, one could start analysing it, as it provided the true basis of historical/literary knowledge.

¹⁸ Iggers and Powell, eds. *Leopold Von Ranke and the shaping of the historical discipline*; Ranke, *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations from 1494 to 1514*.

¹⁹ See Kant, *Critique de la raison pure*, 50–5.

²⁰ Wolf, *Prolegomena ad Homerum*.

²¹ Antonsen et al., *The Grimm Brothers and the Germanic past*; and Grimm, "Preface" to *Kinder - und Hausmärchen gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm*, 439–42.

²² A view popularised in France by Ernest Renan in his *L'avenir de la science*.

²³ Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, 33–6.

²⁴ See Timpanaro, *La genesi del metodo del Lachmann*, especially Chapters 1–3.

After doing this, the work was still only partially done. It was then necessary to contextualise the literary work as a historical document, which meant taking painful steps to establish the date when it was produced and to ascertain possible authorship. This done, the work had then to be read in its context, that is, in relation to other works of the same period or by the same author. For Paris, this was a relatively simple and straightforward task. However, the next step of the work (compiling the edits, variations and comprehensive explanatory notes into a philological edition) was more complicated and time-consuming. If all steps were followed, the end-result, Paris thought, was unquestionably reliable and accurate.

The problems that modern scholars can easily identify in Paris's approach are twofold. First, the use of philology did not mean that scholars were avoiding subjectivity in their readings, as Paris believed. Second, the claim that later variations that scribes introduced in their rewriting of literary texts were valueless in terms of understanding medieval literature meant that they ignored an important part of the literary production of medieval times.²⁵ As we will see on Chapters Two to Four, this sort of modern criticism, while valid, was not entirely unknown in late nineteenth-century scholarship. Whereas many scholars in Gaston Paris's generation ignored the second problem, the first problem was well known to nineteenth-century literary and textual critics. After all, when scholars of Paris's time read a text, they were very aware that their subjectivity necessarily interfered with the reading of that text. This was exactly their criticism of romantic scholars, meaning that the romantics were too subjective in their historical and literary analysis.²⁶ They anguished endlessly over this problem. The arrival of German methods provided a solution. The apparently flawless methods of linguistics, philology and comparative language studies were revolutionary. Scholars then believed that any subjectivity could be overcome if one followed the scientific methodology, identifying the date when manuscripts had been produced so that the sense of a sentence or a word could be established by comparing it with its use in other works of the time. By using philology and linguistics, one could thus reach an objective conclusion about the meaning of a word and, ultimately, the entire text. Consequently, there was very little need to interpret a text or read between the lines in most medieval fictional works,

²⁵ See, for example, Camille, "Philological iconoclasm," 377–81; Hult, "Reading it right," 122–7.

²⁶ Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, vii–viii; Paris, "Paulin Paris et la littérature française du moyen âge," 249–50.

because philology provided an instrument of science with which scholars could solve all problems.

In their enthusiasm, nineteenth-century medievalists went a bit too far at times; they saw chemistry and geology as excellent ancillary sciences as well, as they used every method known to man to show how to analyse (meaning to separate chemical substances) and trace origins (meaning to find out the date when a rock was formed). The trend of applying physical sciences to human sciences was very popular in the 1860s, but thankfully it died out in the mid-1870s, when scholars realised the limitations of comparing medieval texts and language to quartzite, marble and other metamorphic rocks.

In addition to the use of philology and other less orthodox ancillary sciences, nineteenth-century scholars were confident in another aspect of medieval literature which they believed could guarantee an objective reading of a text: the transparency of language. A Rankean idea widely adopted by nineteenth-century scholars, this concept, as Ranke intended it, meant that the language in which historical documents were written was always clear, not needing any interpretation of the content “between the lines.” Ranke’s transparency of language as applied to medieval literature allowed scholars to infer that all medieval literary genres had one thing in common: they mirrored the reality of day-to-day life. In their opinion, in reading medieval texts, one was not reading mere works of fiction, but rather accurate chronicles of medieval life. If a piece of medieval literary work contained obscure references to legends, allusions or metaphors, a modern reader could still arrive at an understanding of it based on historical knowledge.²⁷

There are at least four major problems with the nineteenth-century understanding of medieval texts, problems which have been discussed since as early as the 1890s. First, philology is a human science, and therefore one cannot rule out the possibility of error even in a philological analysis. One might admit that in physical sciences errors do occur, but they become self-evident due to the observation of hard evidence in the real world. In human sciences, however, mistakes are harder to prove, because they often depend on (subjective) points of view. Second, philological analysis does not exclude the possibility of reading between the lines and finding hidden meanings in a text; the author may have placed these meanings there or they may be anachronistic additions of the modern reader. Third, even if there is no hidden sense in the fictional work and philology is a reliable instrument with which to interpret it, this still

²⁷ Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, 41.

does not mean that one study of a work is more scientific than any other. The criteria of what can be viewed as scientific work change constantly, as do the methods and objectives of literary and textual analysis. Fourth, the very idea of transparent language poses problems for the understanding of literary production, problems I will examine in the chapter on the *fabliaux*. The point is that Paris's literary theory, a theory which seemed so obvious to him, is in fact highly debatable, one reason why his work has been the focus of contemporary criticism.

However, despite such criticisms, Paris's work remains a significant contribution to the history of literary theory, medieval studies and medievalism. The questions and problems that scholars in the late nineteenth century were debating were, quite understandably, not always the same as those of today, which is why Paris's work needs to be understood in its own intellectual context. In particular, in Paris's career, the central problem of medieval studies was how to be more scientific and how to supersede the romantic influence in French intellectual life. Yet, if one approaches Paris's work as representing simply the rejection of romanticism and the ultimate triumph of positivism, one understands only one aspect of nineteenth-century medieval studies.²⁸ In fact, as I aim to show, a romantic influence continued to be strong in late nineteenth-century French scholarship, and the triumph of positivism was far from complete.

Romanticism and Positivism: A Matter of Definitions?

When, in 1901, Ferdinand Brunetière began to write on Comtism and positivism in nineteenth-century France,²⁹ it became clear that the positivistic contribution to French intellectual history was no minor issue. For 50 years, positivism had been seen as an essential approach to human sciences, as well as a method, a theory of knowledge and a philosophical doctrine. For Brunetière, its original meaning, the meaning as Comte had intended it, was hard to retrieve. In fact, positivism is one example of those terms of nineteenth-century intellectual life that Nicolet refers to as *mots voyageurs*, because their meanings depend on the context where they were used.³⁰ In a sense, this is true of any word, because the sense of a term is always given by the context in which it is being used. However,

²⁸ Aarsleff, "Scholarship and ideology," 94–6.

²⁹ Brunetière, *Sur les chemins de la croyance*, iv–xvi. See also Bähler's article, "Gaston Paris et Ferdinand Brunetière," 49–68.

³⁰ Nicolet, *L'idée républicaine en France (1789–1924)*, 16–18.

with positivism one comes across another issue: as a philosophical doctrine, Comtean Positivism was very clearly defined by its creator. Yet, by the late nineteenth century, it had been transformed so that it became hard to retrieve its original sense from the different meanings that had been given to it. In order to understand positivism, we must see how it was used in a variety of intellectual contexts.

An initial definition of the term “positivism”³¹ should necessarily relate it to Auguste Comte’s work, which sought to establish an understanding of how humanity had evolved and would further progress until it finally reached its most perfect state. Combining social positivism (the science that studied the human race, focusing on the social relationships between individuals), the religion of humanity (the ethical, non-theistic religion based on the collective and individual aspects of humankind) and a theory of knowledge (based on the assumption that humans evolve from the theological stage into the metaphysical one and then to the positive one, not yet fully achieved), positivism in this sense is a viewpoint that knowledge can be attained only through observation and empiricism, and that these form the basis of modern science. In this context, positivism can be seen as a reaction to the pre-nineteenth-century theories of knowledge, which based some or all their arguments on a priori knowledge and relied upon metaphysical, religious or moralistic assumptions, not simply on material reality.³²

However, the issue here is not Comte’s Positivism, but rather how nineteenth-century scholars of philology, linguistics, history and mythology saw positivism, and how they adopted and sometimes defined this term for their own particular purposes. It should be stressed, however, that most late nineteenth-century scholars hardly ever called their own studies positivistic or ever explicitly mentioned Auguste Comte. Gaston Paris never once mentioned Comte when describing his methodology, although he used the term “*science positive*.” In practice, what scholars did was apply Comte’s system in terms of the essential steps of human civilisation (theological, metaphysical and positive), the importance of science, and the need for order to achieve progress. These aspects of Comtean philosophy came to form part of the common heritage of the academic milieu in mid- and late nineteenth-century France. As Simon suggested, there was thus a difference between institutionalised positivism, which adhered to Comte’s own philosophical statements, and that

³¹ In order to set the difference between Positivism as Comte’s doctrine and the general use of positivism by other nineteenth-century savants, the former will be capitalised, whereas the latter will not.

³² Charlton, *Positivist thought in France during the Second Empire*, 5–7.

practised by those he called “partial adherents,” whose commitment to the positivist cause was less explicit.³³

Among the list of self-proclaimed positivistic scholars were Émile Littré, Hippolyte Taine and Ernest Renan, who were often seen as representatives of the earlier generation of positivists of the Second Empire. Yet Charlton maintained that even they were not “true positivists,” for they used only specific aspects of Comte’s thought while rejecting others.³⁴ Ernest Renan, whose writings on Celtic literature were so influential to Gaston Paris’s generation, highlighted the non-Comtean character of positive academic works in the Second Empire, namely that scholars made a commitment to the democratic order and the need to make France a greater nation.³⁵ Another self-proclaimed positivist and adept of Germanic theories and methodologies was medievalist Gabriel Monod, one of Paul Meyer’s disciples. Monod was, at the time of his involvement in the founding of the *Revue historique* (1876), an enthusiast of the positivistic (but not necessarily Comtean) character of modern historical studies. By positivism, Monod meant the application of an empirical method in the study of the humanities and the moral objective of those studies, which used Germanic scholarship to be more scientific.³⁶ “*Notre siècle*,” Monod said, “*est le siècle de l’histoire*.”³⁷ Relying heavily on the fact that positivism was a term that demanded no further explanation—although it confuses modern readers to no end—nineteenth-century scientists defended the use of the positive method in order to produce scientific knowledge in history and its related disciplines, and, in some cases, to defend a republican, democratic order free from clerical domination. Echoing the discourse of Enlightenment philosophers and their rejection of religion and metaphysics, positivist scholars eagerly turned against what they considered to be the speculative and abstract nature of the studies of their romantic predecessors.

³³ Simon, *European positivism in the nineteenth century*, 10.

³⁴ Charlton, *Positivist thought in France during the Second Empire*, 2–3.

³⁵ Gaulmier, “Tout est fécond, excepté le bon sens,” p. 8.

³⁶ Carbonell disagrees with the idea that Germanic historiography and methods had been incorporated into French historiography in the late nineteenth century, showing the reduced importance of Germanic knowledge in periodicals other than the *Revue Historique* (see Carbonell, “La réception de l’historiographie Allemande en France (1866–1885),” 327–44). Nevertheless, for the group that followed Monod and interacted with Gaston Paris and Paul Meyer, Germanic principles of scientific thought were particularly important.

³⁷ Monod, “Du progrès des études historiques,” 27.

Can one include Gaston Paris among the positivistic scholars of the nineteenth century? One most certainly can, if one defines positivistic as scientific-positivistic, as I explained above. Some have argued that Paris's method, in spite of Paris being a self-proclaimed positivistic author, constantly reconciled romanticism and positivism in his texts.³⁸ This is, as Aarsleff argued, even though Paris himself never admitted to having adopted romantic arguments or methodology to solve the literary problems he was addressing. The younger Paris presented his father, Paulin Paris, as an *apologiste du romantisme*, and characterised himself as a scientist.³⁹ While regarding Paris as a scientist, his friends and students were also unanimously advocates of the idea that Gaston Paris was a "man of his time" and "*n'a fait que participer à l'esprit de son temps*."⁴⁰ And in the late nineteenth century, to be part of the spirit of the time involved being a self-proclaimed positivist, one free from what Ker called "extravagant romanticism," although apparently not free from *any* romanticism.⁴¹ So the misconception of Gaston Paris as both romantic and positivistic began largely from the mixture of praise and criticism he received for his work after his death, and from a more modern need to understand his relationship to his father (pointing to a generational conflict).

As I said before, the term "romanticism" also had several meanings in the late nineteenth century. As an intellectual position, romanticism was based on a rejection of the eighteenth-century rationalism which had preached that reason, not sentiment nor emotion, led mankind to happiness.⁴² The romantic tradition was, in Gaston Paris's view, based on two aspects: first, it involved the search for the ultimate origins of medieval texts in a distant oral past. Second, the romantic tradition was based on the careful narration of a *précis* of facts, dates and important historical figures, mostly focused on politics or the relation between politic and cultural life. For example: the work of Michelet, in Paris's opinion, should be classified as romantic.

Paris thus identified scholars of the generation prior to his own (that is, those in the years 1810–50) as romantic whenever he saw their work as too devoted to partisan politics, whether to the cause of the monarchy or the republic, or to debates of liberalism against conservatism. For him, this is what romantic meant. He himself never discussed French politics or

³⁸ This is the viewpoint of Aarsleff and Cerquiglini.

³⁹ Paris, "Paulin Paris et la littérature française du moyen âge," 217.

⁴⁰ Bédier, *Hommage à Gaston Paris*. Paris, 17.

⁴¹ Ker, "A great French scholar," 104.

⁴² Amoss, "Nineteenth-century medievalism," 296.

matters of religion in his lectures or articles.⁴³ A monarchist, he refused to have any political position on the Second Empire or the Third Republic, and remained detached when talking about internal affairs and foreign policy. As most scholars of his time, Gaston Paris also avoided religious debate. The purpose of his work, as he viewed it, was not to speculate on political or religious systems or to advocate one or another. He intended to study the French past in order to understand the French present, not to achieve agency in contemporary matters. The prize of knowledge was scientific knowledge itself; anything else was romanticism.

In order to affirm their own importance, historians and philologists in the Third Republic thus represented their predecessors as romantic, meaning untrustworthy, as they saw themselves as engaged in a project that was more effective and scientific, more accurate in the use of sources, and less politically partial than the one that preceded their own. An example of their commitment to the progress of science was the use of certain aspects of Comte's positive philosophy, since Comte managed to capture in his doctrine the desire for more scientific evidence expressed by academics in the 1830s and 40s.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Comte's Positivism was a French alternative to German scientific methods, one reason why there was a huge surge in popularity of Comtean Positivism in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. A reaction, no doubt, but one which was also in line with the increased interest since the 1860s in making medieval studies (and in fact all historical studies) more scientific.

Today's understanding of positivism and romanticism as being mutually exclusive was created by late nineteenth-century scholars themselves, and perpetuated by twentieth-century scholars. This understanding was re-evaluated to some extent in the 1970s, especially with the publication of the special issue of the journal *Romantisme* entitled *Le(s) positivisme(s)* in 1978. What emerged, then, was a newly found disbelief in positivism as a methodology and in the epistemological differences between positivism and romanticism as applied to the human sciences. So the line of demarcation between positivism and romanticism disappeared, and both methodological approaches came to be seen as insufficient to describe the work of mid- to late nineteenth-century medievalists and other historians and those working in the human sciences. In my analysis of Gaston Paris's work and other scholars in nineteenth-century French academia, I seek to show that there were

⁴³ The classic exception to this rule is Paris's lecture on *Roland* in 1871. In this lecture, Paris passionately discussed the German occupation and the importance of Roland as both a literary landmark and a national hero.

⁴⁴ Simon, *European positivism in the nineteenth century*, 23.

differences between romantic and positivistic thought as these two strands of thought were represented, and that this distinction should not be discarded so quickly.⁴⁵ In this book, I will therefore analyse three of the genres that Paris studied (epic, *fabliaux* and Arthurian literature) to show how he applied his positivist method and how, despite his own intentions, he himself lapsed into the romanticism he criticised in others. Rather than see this lapse as a particular characteristic of late nineteenth-century medievalism as scholars combined a romantic and positivistic approach, I tend to see it as a feature of Gaston Paris's work above all else, partly because of his personal aims when referring to medieval French literature and history, and partly because, in order to answer the questions he asked of medieval texts, a scientific-positivistic methodology alone would hardly suffice.

Arguing the case for a need to distinguish between what scholars understood as romanticism as opposed to what they understood as positivism means going back to the fundamentals of creating medieval studies as a science in the nineteenth century. The need to develop medieval studies was closely related to the necessity to validate studies of the French medieval past as scientific and truthful, this being a concern of scholars as early as 1860, having reached a peak in the 1870s after the Franco-Prussian War. How then did Gaston Paris and his contemporaries solve the methodological problems that they faced in their works (especially in their texts on the *fabliaux*) based on linguistics, philology and textual criticism? Each chapter will offer detail about how Paris used the scientific-positivistic methodology he valued, and assess whether in practice Paris was using the method consistently or not. The point to stress here is that Paris neither used the classic definition of Comtean Positivism, nor did he create a definition of his own. He was laconic when speaking of his method, although he himself had made his so-called scientific method the central feature of his work. One of the reasons why nineteenth-century medievalists emphasised the use of philological positivism in their studies was because their sources took the form of poems and other fictional texts.⁴⁶ Previously, it had been common for scholars who were self-proclaimed positivists to affirm that poetry was by definition unreasonable and subjective, and, as a result, not open to scientific analysis. For Paris,

⁴⁵ See, for example, Walch, "Romantisme et positivisme," 161–9.

⁴⁶ The period 1865–1900 is referred to in modern historiography as that of "philological positivism," meaning the combination of positivism and philological analysis in text editing. The term is not accurate, as the usage of positivism was more a rhetorical effort to make the discipline of philology more credible than an actual theoretical and methodological foundation for philological research.

by contrast, one could indeed make sense of poems by applying the rules and methods of philology as a science. Science was the only possible way to make medieval studies, as Ker said, “free from any extravagant romanticism.”⁴⁷ Adopting scientism as a method, the scholars engaged in medieval studies in late nineteenth-century France were united in one other main purpose: to understand better the history of France and its positive qualities, such as loyalty and courage (Roland), honour (Lancelot), democracy (the Round Table as portrayed by French poets) and humour (the *fabliaux*). Scholars believed that through the study of history and literature they would be able to trace the roots of the valuable characteristics of the French people. As will be shown, this is particularly true in the case of the attempt to accept *La chanson de Roland* as a French poem, while rejecting *Tristan et Iseut* as a foreign one. For nineteenth-century scholars, it was necessary that academic studies should be truthful, accurate and scientific. This contradiction between being scientific while offering a value judgement was evident in Paris’s work and in nineteenth-century historical and literary research in general. In this sense, as in many others, Paris was indeed a man of his time.

In the following three chapters, I will therefore investigate the combination of romanticism and positivism in Paris’s thought. Although scholars in the nineteenth century believed to be practising what they themselves understood as a positivist method, they were quite frequently not positivistic and even openly romantic. For Cerquiglini, this combination of positivism and romanticism in Gaston Paris’s work is a result of his lack of a method to appreciate historical and literary evidence. Cerquiglini and Aarsleff refer to Paris as ultimately representing the “romantic-positivistic tradition.”⁴⁸ For Bloch and Hult, it was for psychological reasons that Gaston Paris was romantic and positivistic at the same time.⁴⁹ In fact, this paradox, being simultaneously romantic and positivistic, occurred because of an inherent contradiction between the aim of nineteenth-century scholars to practise textual criticism and the impossibility that textual criticism could ever solve the problems that they themselves addressed, as we shall see.

⁴⁷ Ker, “A great French scholar,” 104.

⁴⁸ See Cerquiglini, *Éloge de la variante*, 74–86 and Aarsleff, “Scholarship and ideology,” 99–103.

⁴⁹ Hult, “Gaston Paris and the invention of courtly love,” 211–14; Bloch, “Mieux vaut jamais que tard,” 68–73.

CHAPTER TWO

GASTON PARIS AND POLITICS: THE EPIC AS A NATIONAL LEGEND

*L'Iliade est donc une œuvre collective, à peu près au même degré et dans le même sens que nos cathédrales du moyen âge.*¹

*Il est un dernier point de vue sur lequel nous appellerons l'attention, c'est la valeur de notre ancienne littérature pour l'éducation nationale. Nous ne parlons pas seulement de l'instruction qui se donne dans nos collèges: les Allemands associent dans leurs gymnases l'étude de leur poésie du moyen-âge à celle des œuvres antiques; chez nous aussi, croyons-nous, il y aurait tout avantage à faire lire à la jeunesse Joinville et la Chanson de Roland à côté d'Hérodote et de l'Iliade. Mais pour tout le monde il y a un grand intérêt à connaître ce qu'a été pendant six siècles la vie intellectuelle et morale de la France: aussi ne craignons-nous pas, à côté de simples reproductions, de joindre à nos volumes des introductions, des commentaires, des glossaires, des traductions même qui mettent à la portée de tous le plaisir et le profit que contiennent ces vieux livres.*²

Before starting an analysis of Gaston Paris's theories and methods, it is necessary to examine the context in which he wrote. The first genre Gaston Paris ever examined was the epic, and his considerations about the genre were influenced by both new German methods of philological analysis and a new scientific paradigm in 1860s' France. So we start here with an examination of Gaston Paris's context as relevant to his work on the epic in the period 1850–70. Chapter Three will look at the *fabliaux*, a genre about which Paris started to write in 1874, three years after the Franco-Prussian War. Chapter Four will look at Paris's work on the Arthurian cycle, which he started in the 1880s, to understand how his feelings about French nationalism and his scientific ambitions developed in the late nineteenth century.

¹ Bréal, *Pour mieux connaître Homère*, 46.

² Meyer, "Société des anciens textes français," 629.

All considerations about Paris's method inevitably lead to a fundamental issue in any study of nineteenth-century medievalism: the influence of nationalism on medieval studies. Hobsbawm, Breuilly, Iggers³ and others have argued that the nineteenth century was the era of nationalism, distinguishing it from the period of national feeling that resulted from the creation of nation-states in the fifteenth century. Certainly, it is impossible to understand the work of Gaston Paris's generation without a fundamental consideration of nineteenth-century nationalism and how it relates to Franco-German relations in the period. If this is true of Paris's work on the *fabliaux* and the Arthurian tales, it is even more relevant to his work on the medieval epic, as we will see below.

The Franco-German Relationship in the Nineteenth Century

According to Anthony Smith, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 was a key event in arousing French nationalism.⁴ Bloch and Hult share this opinion, highlighting that in France medieval studies were driven by nationalism: “the nationalistic purpose of medieval studies in France emerged primarily after the Franco-Prussian War and in reaction to defeat.”⁵ In spite of these claims, I find that a more profitable understanding of the creation of medieval studies in nineteenth-century France is one that recognises their existence before 1870 and then compares their nature to that of post-Franco-Prussian War work. Here I will argue that national feeling oriented and guided all studies of history and literature well before 1870, and that French people can be said to have had a modern national feeling even before the war, even if this feeling is not labelled as nationalism.⁶ How do these two ideas differ, and why is this difference relevant to an understanding of Gaston Paris's medievalism?

Nationalism is often seen as a recent sentiment in the Western world. The term made its first official appearance in 1798, when the Abbé Barruel lectured on nationalism and patriotism.⁷ British in its origins, the term was included in French dictionaries by 1823 and integrated into the

³ Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780*; Iggers, “Nationalism and historiography, 1789–1996,” 15–29; Breuilly, *The formation of the first German nation-state*.

⁴ Smith, *The nation in history*, 10–12.

⁵ Bloch and Nichols, “Introduction” to *Medievalism and the modernist temper*, 14.

⁶ See, for example, Revillout, “La littérature du moyen âge et le romantisme,” 185.

⁷ Girardet, ed. *Le nationalisme français: 1871–1914*, 7.

common vocabulary after 1830.⁸ In Martin's view, the meaning of nationality in France was a direct product of the Napoleonic domination of Europe. French expansionism triggered nationalistic sentiment and its corresponding word. In this sense, the idea of nationalism in the nineteenth century cannot be separated from that of expansionism, which Girardet called "*nationalisme de defence*."⁹ According to this view, national feeling emerges in moments of external conflict; in the nineteenth century, this led to the formation of a more accentuated national feeling, the feeling of love for one's motherland. Nationalism, by contrast, is "an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation."¹⁰ This definition is probably the most closely linked to the case of nineteenth-century French nationalism prior to 1870.

During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the France of the *philosophes* had served as the intellectual model for the rest of Europe in terms of good taste, literature, poetry, style and philosophy, what the French called an ideal of *civilisation*. This was related not only to politesse and social etiquette, but also to reason itself, which in this context meant the rejection of religious dogma and the acceptance of a scientific mentality.¹¹ This concept of civilisation was adopted by every European nation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, putting France at the forefront of European intellectual life.

Germany was one of the greatest importers of the French idea of civilisation. As Ringer put it, during the eighteenth century, French models of politeness ruled Germany, and French was the language of the German aristocracy.¹² Nevertheless, in the late eighteenth century, this situation changed significantly, as German philosophers, such as Hegel and Kant, began to view the rationalistic ideal and the emphasis on progress of the French Enlightenment with suspicion, arguing that such an ideal did not provide any basis for spiritual improvement. Opposed to the pragmatic concept of *civilisation*, the Germans elaborated that of *Kultur*, meaning an ongoing process of self-cultivation (*Bildung*) and spiritual enhancement.¹³ *Kultur* developed into a uniquely Germanic reaction to French ideas, and

⁸ Martin, *The making of France*, 220–1.

⁹ Girardet, *Le nationalisme français*, 18.

¹⁰ Smith, *The nation in history*, 3.

¹¹ Elias, *O processo civilizador*, II, 62.

¹² Ringer, *The decline of the German mandarins*, 88.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 90.

became the general ideology of German intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴

The feature of this concept of *Kultur* that is of particular interest here is its close connection with the idea of national culture. The French concept of civilisation was not, in a strict sense, related to that of a national spirit, in terms of an individual's body, spirit and soul belonging to a national community. By contrast, the concept of culture developed by German romantics was used to symbolise a metonymic reality, in which the part represented the whole, so that the individual represented the nation.¹⁵ This was one reason why German philosophers in the early nineteenth century viewed medieval studies as a means of access to the earliest expressions of Germanic ideals. Nineteenth-century romantics were fascinated by medieval literature and its representations of the physical/material and spiritual worlds as intimately interconnected. Another reason for their interest in the Middle Ages was the fact that scholars claimed that Germany as a nation began in the Middle Ages, even if its political unity was only to emerge centuries later.

In their attachment to religion, nationalism and the spiritual community between individuals of the same nation, German scholars rejected the idea of progress as the ultimate goal of humanity, an idea which was typical of mid- and late eighteenth-century French philosophy. This growing discontent with French philosophical values led to a void that was filled, in the early 1800s, by the concept of the nation itself. Seen as the logical goal of history, the perfect state of humanity, national feeling became the replacement for all other doctrines based on a belief in reason or religion.¹⁶

If during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Germans had every reason to envy French knowledge and philosophy, in the nineteenth century the situation was reversed. Not only did German philosophy bloom with Immanuel Kant, but German Idealism, as it became known in the early 1800s, now offered a viable alternative to French extreme rationalism.¹⁷ Moreover, through the study of German folklore, the work of scholars such as the Brothers Grimm fostered nationalism. French scholars, fascinated by the new knowledge in human sciences, incorporated German methods, ideas and concepts in their work. Whereas

¹⁴ Werner, "A propos de la notion de philologie moderne," 11.

¹⁵ Werner, "La place du champ littéraire dans les cultures nationales," 17.

¹⁶ Oergel, *The return of King Arthur and the Nibelungen*, 239.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

Germany had once been a nation that imitated French ideas, now France emulated German thought.¹⁸

What were the immediate repercussions of this new German ideal within French academia? The adjective “romantic,” which had served to characterise German ideas that were viewed as anti-progress, appeared in France in the early 1800s. Although there was never one single romantic movement, but rather a variety of romanticisms, the term was nevertheless widely adopted and attributed to a specific literary movement which started in Germany and spread to other European nations.¹⁹ Symbolism, the notion of a chaotic universe and myths of creation were central to romantic thought. And yet romanticism was not confined to these.²⁰ Nostalgia for the past was also a manifestation of romantic thought, one which influenced scholars in France, as it did in Germany, to devote themselves to the study of history.

As a result of the Napoleonic Wars and the increased importance of German scholarship, members of the French intellectual elite began sending their children to Germany in order to learn what France could no longer teach, in a movement of intellectual exchange that continued until the mid-1850s. In 1810, Germaine de Staël published her *De l'Allemagne*, introducing the French intellectual elite to a new world of poetry, philosophy and language, a German civilisation to be admired. Against French rationalism, de Staël opposed the imagination, the idealism and impressionism of romantic Germany, arguing that these values were unknown to contemporary France.²¹ De Staël's political inclination was towards liberalism. In her opinion, the absence of a centralised state in Germany permitted a flow of ideas, whereas in France ideas were controlled by the state. Her work helped to awaken in France an ideal of a society of intelligent and sophisticated men in which politicians had to be morally and intellectually superior. A new interest in Germanic philosophy and literature, even if expressed in terms of academic jealousy, was being promoted.

This intellectual rivalry between Germany and France played a crucial role in the formation and shaping of medieval studies in the nineteenth century. Two key moments can be identified in this rivalry and in the responses of French academics to the Germanic influence. The first was

¹⁸ That is, for instance, the aim of Madame de Staël's text in which she praised the idealist, cultural Germany versus a France of empty rationalism (de Staël, *On Germany*, 218–20).

¹⁹ See Lovejoy, “The meaning of romanticism for the historian of ideas,” 257–78.

²⁰ See also Porter and Teich, eds. *Romanticism in national context*, 1–8.

²¹ De Staël, *On Germany*, 218–20.

that following de Staël's work; the second, after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 (which the French called *la guerre de France*).²² In this second moment, French scholars sought to achieve academic revenge against Germany (since military revenge was out of the question). But how could they do this despite their own stated aim of avoiding political subjectivity? Furthermore, how could France have political and intellectual revenge when French scholars themselves were using Germanic methods in scholarly work?

Before 1855, the prevailing attitude within France was one of great admiration of Germanic scholarship and healthy rivalry. It was only in the early 1860s that an uneasy feeling overtook Gaston Paris and his generation. Although it still remained acceptable to emulate Germanic literature, art and historical method, French scholars were increasingly uncomfortable with the fact that German scholars were producing more work on French literature than were the French themselves. It was due to this preoccupation with the need for French scholars themselves to develop scientific medievalism that Meyer and Paris created the *Revue critique* in 1866.²³ However, if before 1870, French national sentiment did not rule out the possibility of harmonious coexistence with Germany, and even emulation and healthy competition between the two nations, the situation changed in the 1870s. French nationalism was awakened when Germany invaded French territory. From this point on, it was war, not only on the battlefield, but also in the realm of the academy.

The aim of achieving national vengeance while retaining Germanic scientific methods and remaining free of romantic subjectivity (that is, political partisanship) posed a problem for French academics. Not only had France been deprived of two of its most important provinces as a nation, but also, as an intellectual centre, French scholars believed it had been internationally dishonoured. Literary and, more importantly, historical studies thus became the stage for patriotic feelings which were in direct conflict with the ideal of scientific objectivity. Whereas history had, during the previous century, provided a sketch of the universal progress of humankind,²⁴ in the nineteenth century its value changed. History now belonged to national memory, allowing an appeal to the great facts that allowed some nations to outshine others. History had become a profession, one requiring specialised training for research and teaching.

²² Mazade, "La guerre de France (1870–1871)," 257–97.

²³ For more information about the intellectual motives behind the foundation of journals in late nineteenth-century France, see DiVanna, "The early days of Romania and the progress of Romance philology in France."

²⁴ Cassirer, *A filosofia do Iluminismo*, 5–25.

Yet its main purpose was to give the nation a sense of unity, rather than to satisfy the interests of the competing social groups within it.²⁵

As noted above, Howard Bloch claimed that medieval studies emerged in France as part of the intellectual reaction to the Franco-Prussian War, as French academics attempted to overcome the German Empire in terms of intellectual production and a memorable historical past.²⁶ Yet this is only partly true. First, it can hardly be said that medieval studies did not exist before 1870. Indeed, historical and philological research on the Middle Ages can be dated as far back as the seventeenth century.²⁷ Criticised or praised, medieval art, literature and architecture had long been the focus of interest as the repository of the old France herself. In this sense, what happened in the nineteenth century was not the birth of medieval studies per se, but rather its organisation in institutions of higher education and the shift from a negative perception of medieval times to a more positive assessment.

As early as 1850, many French scholars were disgusted by what they saw as the decadence of the French people and their morals, politics and institutions. It was disconcerting for the French to feel that their nation had declined in less than 100 years from being a bastion of progress and civilisation to the status of a second-rate nation, one whose educational system was mediocre and whose politics were corrupt. As Hansen put it: "Of all the proofs of decadence, however, the most important, the most complex, and certainly the most frequently cited was the breakdown of traditional political and social institutions, ideas and costumes. No other phenomenon, not even that of biological decay caused more resentment and anger among the intellectuals."²⁸ Ernest Renan exemplifies this feeling of social, political, cultural and biological decay in a letter to M. Berthelot in 1849:

Une chose aussi me frappe beaucoup, c'est l'affaiblissement physique de cette race. Elle n'a pas encore en siècle de civilisation et elle est usée. Entre toutes les personnes que je vois ici, à peine en puis-je compter deux ou trois vraiment énergiques. Tous les enfants que j'ai sous les yeux (mes petits-neveux font heureusement exception) sont faibles, maladifs, ne vivent qu'à force de remèdes et de cautères. ... Cette vie est frivole et n'a rien de beau, et je ne puis m'empêcher de lui reconnaître quelque ressemblance avec celle de cette génération fatiguée, au bout de cent cinquante ans de

²⁵ Gilbert, "The professionalization of history in the nineteenth century," 321–2.

²⁶ Bloch, "Mieux vaut jamais que tard," 75–6.

²⁷ Keller, *The Middle Ages reconsidered*, 1–50.

²⁸ Hansen, *Disaffection and decadence*, 5.

*réflexion, qui vit la fin de la république romaine et se rua dans la servitude.*²⁹

When French scholars realised how much more advanced was Germanic scholarship, a feeling of intellectual inferiority followed this sense of biological decay.

It is crucial to understand that what happened after the Franco-Prussian War was not just the creation of an academic environment by scholars and government so as to emphasise the importance of medieval studies to France as a nation. Rather, as national feeling itself changed its nature, so did medieval studies.³⁰ Before the war, French scholars believed their studies to be of inferior quality when compared with German ones, and thought that this situation could be overcome with the help of a German approach to medieval texts via the use of philology. After the war, bitterness led scholars to question the quality of French academic work. At first, French scholars rejected Germanic knowledge and attempted to build the foundations of medieval studies on a renewed French knowledge. The emphasis on the word “positivism” happened at this time, between 1871 and 1874, as an alternative to using the term “philology,” which had become identified as a term of Germanic studies. Then, in a second phase of development, from 1875 to 1890, French scholars stopped referring to the war explicitly and instead sought to achieve primacy in medieval studies in Europe.

In this frenzy, they published more articles and works than in any other period of history. Whenever a German scholar published a text, it was soon followed by a torrent of French reviews, articles or books on the same subject. The third stage of development, from 1890 to 1914, was characterised by a calmer environment within French academia. The war of 1870–71 was now a more distant reality, and many of the new academics had been children when the war was fought. Paris and those of his generation were approaching their sixties or seventies; new students seemed to be ready to inherit the chairs of those who came before them.

Fortunately for nineteenth-century scholars, the French public itself was quite willing to be seduced by medieval texts. Especially after the Franco-Prussian War, medievalism passed beyond the doors of the academy and met with the interest of a larger public. But the process was slow, and, even in the late 1870s and 80s, most periodicals and publications still needed government funds in order to exist. One way or

²⁹ Letter from E. Renan to M. Berthelot (4 September 1849), in Renan and Berthelot, *Correspondance: 1847–1892*, 37–8.

³⁰ For details, see Chapter Three.

another, it was clear that medieval texts spoke to French society and that the late nineteenth-century French found something which was agreeable to them in the culture of the Middle Ages. However, despite their claims, the Middle Ages as read, translated and edited by Gaston Paris and his contemporaries were not the “true” Middle Ages but rather their own representation of it. This representation was inaccurate in several points, namely the way they understood the epic as product of the nation, the *fabliaux* as stories based on an oriental source, and the way they viewed Arthurian tales solely as examples of the medieval idea of courtly love, as we will see. Of course, at the time, scholars did not think they were representing the Middle Ages, rather they believed that their Middle Ages was the true one, and that the texts they presented were testimonies of it. This is why medieval texts such as *La chanson de Roland*, *Lancelot* and others were so important in late nineteenth-century France; they were the only surviving elements of the Middle Ages which could help arouse interest in the French public. The public, scholars thought, would not be interested, for example, in sources such as administrative texts or theological treatises. Making the Middle Ages popular was a work which depended on textual scholars, who were seen as the interpreters of this particular historical period, the national period par excellence.

In the eventful years of war, rising imperialism and growing tension between European nations, French academics attempted to encourage nationalism in all aspects of medieval studies. They denied that Germany had been a nation in medieval times so as to belittle its historical importance. In rejecting German concepts in historical and literary studies, French academics believed themselves to be attacking Germany itself. Condemning the romanticism of Herder, Schlegel and the great writers of the German Empire, French scholars defended the masculinity, science and power of their own nation. Voluntarily forgetting where they themselves had learned their philology and methodology, French scholars sought to declare intellectual war on France’s main enemy. This academic war was no easy task. In their enthusiasm to produce evidence of French greatness, scholars had to locate, identify, catalogue and edit a massive quantity of Old French manuscripts, studying the language deeply, methodically and scientifically. And therein resided the appeal of medieval studies; more than just a field of the humanities, medieval literature and history were the blank canvasses on which to practise the elements of science which separated the stronger from the weaker nations. In place of an international war and a civil war, and paralleling the war of 1870–71, academics called for war in academia.

In the period 1870–80, Gaston Paris continuously expressed his disapproval of the methods of his father's generation by emphasising the contrast between an old medievalism and a new one. For Gaston Paris, the version of medieval studies developed by his father's generation was one founded on the romantic adoration of manuscripts and the pleasure of analysing such ancient material which represented France in a very remote past.³¹ For the romantics, the Middle Ages was a period to be admired because it had so many good qualities. However, the romantics also saw much of France's medieval heritage as surviving in their own society and politics (for example the role of the Church and the monarchy), and believed that other values, such as chivalry and courtesy, could be regained from studying medieval times. The medievalists of Gaston Paris's generation, on the other hand, were professionals, in the sense that the study of the Middle Ages was their source of income. Pleasure gave way to science, and the function of science was to reveal the truth. This was not only a methodological diatribe; Gaston Paris's discourse was deeply rooted in national feelings which, scholars at the time claimed, could be traced back to the Middle Ages. While seeking to be scientific and objective, for them the Middle Ages remained as the image of all the good that had been lost: democratic values, spirituality, clear literature. The Middle Ages became the national symbol. Like their romantic predecessors, late nineteenth-century scholars projected their own values onto the past, reconstructing the Middle Ages according to their own paradigms.

The rest of this chapter will investigate how Gaston Paris did this, taking his work on the epic genre as an object. I will first outline the work that had been done on the epic before 1860, then I will look at Gaston Paris's theories on the medieval epic and his contribution to modern views of epic literature. Lastly, I will investigate the criticism Paris's work suffered in the very late nineteenth century, primarily from his former student Joseph Bédier.

Early Approaches to the Medieval Epic

Ainsi faite pour servir à l'instruction et au délassement de la nation française, la chanson de geste devait être et fut effectivement avant tout un poème guerrier. Les sentiments délicats de la vie paisible n'y tinrent qu'une place étroite et accidentelle; les actions intrépides, les grands effets de la force corporelle, les lâches trahisons, les généreux dévouements, les calamités ou les victoires décisives, eurent le privilège d'y saisir et d'y

³¹ Paris, "Paulin Paris et la littérature française du moyen âge," 227–8.

*captiver l'attention des auditeurs. Elle était chantée, et le jongleur, en la déclamant, s'accompagnait d'un instrument comme la rote ou vielle, la viole ou le violon.*³²

As noted above, in modern studies of nineteenth-century scholarship, it is frequently claimed that medieval studies in France only came into existence in institutional terms during the last third of the nineteenth century. This is, for example, Bloch's interpretation of medieval studies in this period.³³ Bloch and Hult argue that the Franco-Prussian War led to a new interest in medieval epics, notably *La chanson de Roland*, as national symbols.³⁴ Bloch and Gumbrecht, meanwhile, claim that Franco-Germanic rivalry transformed the nature of Romance philology. If Romance philology was originally supposed to be based on general linguistics and literary hermeneutics, it became, due to the Franco-Germanic rivalry, a discipline based on a variety of techniques to establish, locate and identify medieval texts.³⁵

Against this approach, I will argue that medieval studies in France had an institutional existence and showed concern for methodological rigour long before 1870. This interest in the Middle Ages can be seen in the publication of several editions of medieval epics in the period 1830–60,³⁶ in Paulin Paris's attempts to create interest in medieval texts,³⁷ in Claude Fauriel's works on medieval literature, in Francisque Michel's pioneer edition of *La chanson de Roland*, and also in the debates that followed Paris's and Michel's treatment of the epics in France.³⁸ Furthermore, the philological movement of the 1860s was far from being based on hermeneutics and linguistics as Bloch claimed; it was in fact still based on finding, cataloguing and editing manuscripts. In order to analyse medieval texts in a philological manner, academics needed to have access to as many manuscripts and their translations and critical editions as possible, hence they concentrated on finding the manuscripts and editing or translating the text. Indeed, the use of linguistics and literary hermeneutics

³² Paris, P., *Histoire littéraire de la France*, XXII, 259.

³³ See Bloch, "842. The first document and the birth of medieval studies," 12–13.

³⁴ Ibid., 8–13; Hult, "Gaston Paris and the invention of courtly love," 210–11.

³⁵ Bloch, "Mieux vaut jamais que tard," 64. See also Gumbrecht, "Un souffle d'Allemagne ayant passé," 25–9.

³⁶ See below the editions of *La chanson de Roland* in the 1830s and 40s in particular.

³⁷ Paris, P., *Les manuscrits français de la Bibliothèque du Roi*.

³⁸ Génin, *La chanson de Roland*; see also Vitet, "La Chanson de Roland," 817–64.

was more central to philology in the 1890s and 1920s than in the period 1860–80.

One of the earliest examples of the association of patriotism with the study of medieval history and literature in France can be found in the first volume of the *Bibliothèque de l'école des chartes*, a periodical destined to print relevant works on “*l'étude et la conservation des monuments originaux de l'histoire nationale*,” first published in 1839. The recently founded École Royale des Chartes had the highest ambitions for French academia. In Martial Delpit's words in the first issue of the journal:

*Si, comme le pensent tous les esprits élevés, l'intérêt des sciences historiques et archéologiques est compté au nombre des grands intérêts nationaux, de toutes les écoles spéciales fondées par le gouvernement, et placées sous sa protection immédiate, l'École royale des Chartes, par l'objet de ses études comme par le but de ses travaux, est assurément l'une des plus dignes de fixer l'attention.*³⁹

Study of the medieval epic and editions of medieval texts in this period illustrates how far historical and philological criticism had advanced by the mid-nineteenth century. It also shows the existence of a systematic methodology for appraising medieval texts (involving the identification of manuscripts, the process of cataloguing the same, translating from Old French and cross-referencing with other manuscripts for philological analysis), rather than a simple erudite interest without any formal methodology. All considered, it was a good first effort at compiling a critical history and producing critical editions of texts which had been unknown for centuries. It was, at the same time, an institutional effort, since medieval studies were being taught and researched within the walls of academia. The teachers, however, were not academics. Paulin Paris, for example, was a librarian, and this is one of the reasons why scholars in the 1860s and 70s would begin to see the previous generation and the studies they conducted as less institutional and less professional when compared to their own studies.

When referring to the qualitative differences between the works of Paulin Paris's generation and his son Gaston, Charles Ridoux identified the “*manque d'enracinement institutionnel des études médiévales à cette époque*” as the main reason why Paulin Paris's generation had accomplished less than that of Gaston Paris.⁴⁰ This is a rather demeaning view of the works of those writing in the first half of the nineteenth

³⁹ Delpit, “Notice historique sur l'École royale des chartes,” 1.

⁴⁰ Ridoux, *Évolution des études médiévales en France de 1860 à 1914*, 42.

century. It is always easy to judge the past for what it was lacking rather than for what it achieved, but this is not a profitable way of assessing earlier scholarship. Here I argue that the effort and work of scholars in the period 1830–60 should be seen as part of the history of medieval studies, and not as their pre-history.

Certainly, and paradoxically, no one understood and appreciated the achievements of the 1820s generation better than Gaston Paris. Although suspicious and critical of the “*apologie du romantisme*” that his father and his contemporaries had promoted, he also claimed that it was because of the efforts of that generation that medieval studies were experiencing such success in his own time. When discussing the work of his father Paulin (1800–81) and others of his generation, Gaston Paris bestowed his highest praise, giving them credit for the fact that “*il n’en était pas ainsi il y a quarante ans: une résistance tacite, mais obstinée, fermait les portes du haut enseignement à ce qu’on regardait comme une sorte de forme pédante du romantisme.*”⁴¹ Was he simply being tongue in cheek? Hardly. The whole point of the opposition between the scientific work of his generation against the romantic work of a previous one was to show that hard work had to be accompanied by a solid methodology, otherwise it did not constitute professional studies. Nonetheless, as Gaston himself recognised, the scholars of Paulin Paris’s generation managed to awaken interest in medieval studies, thus distancing themselves from pure *érudits* or antiquarians—because the latter lacked a clear method to make sense of their sources—even if they did not quite reach the status of serious philologists of Gaston Paris’s generation.⁴² Their work of cataloguing texts, finding manuscripts, transcribing and translating them was, in Gaston Paris’s view, crucial in giving an impetus to medieval studies.

For the younger Paris, his father had been the first to complete the project which Victor le Clerc had initiated in the 1820s, that of

⁴¹ Paris, “Paulin Paris et la littérature française du moyen âge,” 213.

⁴² What Ridoux called the “serious” or sophisticated stage of philological analysis in French academia began when Gaston Paris, always a great enthusiast of Germanic scholarship, introduced the methods of the German philologist Karl Lachmann (1793–1851) into Parisian academia while preparing his edition of *La vie de Saint Alexis*. Lachmann was most famous in Germany and France for his editions of the *Nibelungenlied* (1826), Walter von der Vogelweide’s poems (1827) and Hartmann von der Aue’s *Iwein* (1847). Although in Germany scholars such as Holtzmann, Bartsch, Zarncke and Gödeke had already debated and rejected Lachmann’s theories and his hypothesis regarding the *Nibelungenlied*, Paris chose to adopt the fundamentals of his method and apply them to medieval French manuscripts.

establishing a set of procedures designed to recognise and understand medieval literature.

*D'autres avaient publié plus de textes; d'autres avaient peut-être serré de plus près certaines questions philologiques, encore, à vrai dire, obscures pour tout le monde en France; d'autres enfin avaient exposé leurs idées sous une forme plus ample, plus oratoire et plus accessible au grand public; aucun ne connaissait réellement aussi bien la littérature du moyen âge dans toutes ses variétés.*⁴³

For him, the limitation of his father's generation was to have been “*purement littéraire*,” rather than “*historique*.” But he also claimed that this was, at the same time, the greatest value of Paulin Paris's generation, because through their love of literature, they managed to popularise texts that might otherwise still have been unknown in France. In his opinion, his father suffered from an “*enthousiasme aveugle qui trouve sublime ou charmant, sans distinction, tout ce que nous ont conservé de vieux manuscrits*.”⁴⁴

However, Gaston Paris claimed that Paulin Paris also played a crucial role in systematically cataloguing manuscripts of French texts within France. In his opinion, Paulin Paris's massive work *Les manuscrits françois de la Bibliothèque du Roi* (1836–48)⁴⁵ was the first successful effort to catalogue the manuscripts, compile their numbers and provide a brief summary of the texts. With the 1848 revolution, the limited funding that scholars had received for their research was suspended. Paris's final volume of his work on the manuscripts of the Royal Library was never published, and a wave of discontent and concern for the future of medieval studies (as well as other studies in humanities) overtook French academia. For the young Paris, his father's work on the Royal Library allowed the next generation to discover, in catalogued manuscripts, “*les œuvres poétiques elles-mêmes comme étant avant tout des documents historiques, comme faisant partie de l'histoire prise dans son sens le plus large, comme étant les faits mêmes de l'histoire de la langue, des sentiments et de la pensée*.”⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Gaston Paris's conception of history and literature differed from that of his father. The two men belonged to two different intellectual contexts. For Paris the younger, what his father's generation

⁴³ Paris, “Paulin Paris et la littérature française du moyen âge,” 214.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴⁵ See Paris, P., *Les manuscrits françois de la Bibliothèque du Roi*.

⁴⁶ Paris, “Paulin Paris et la littérature française du moyen âge,” 220.

aimed to find in medieval literature was poetry, pure pleasure, “*l’émotion esthétique*.” Paulin Paris’s research had not only popularised in France the idea that medieval France had indeed produced epic poetry (an idea that Voltaire, for example, had ridiculed)⁴⁷ but also made those texts seem enjoyable to a slowly widening public. If he emphasised the poetic nature of those epics, he was nonetheless—and this is what Gaston Paris considered a great advantage of his father’s work—*sincère* when studying them.⁴⁸ In his son’s opinion, being a scientist as well as a medievalist, Paulin Paris never exaggerated or invented elements that did not exist in the original texts themselves.

One of the differences between the two generations of medievalists in the nineteenth century was that the first generation saw its task as popularising medieval literature and presented it as aesthetically agreeable, whereas the second generation sought to be scientific and restrict the teaching of medieval studies within the walls of academia. A second key difference lies in the nature of their critical editions and reviews, as is clear from the controversy surrounding *La chanson de Roland*. According to Redman, French readers in the early nineteenth century were aware that a *Chanson de Roland* had existed, but they knew very little about it.⁴⁹ In 1804, Charles Nodier, a librarian at the Bibliothèque de l’arsenal, reviewed a new poem on Charlemagne alluding to the name of Roland, Charlemagne’s nephew.⁵⁰ Decades of sparse references followed.⁵¹ In 1832, Paulin Paris, in his *Lettre à M. Monmerqué sur les romans des douze pairs de France*, reinforced the importance of Roland’s legend to French national culture.⁵² Young scholar Henri Monin produced later in the same year his thesis on *La chanson de Roncevaux* using manuscripts 7227/5 and 254/21 of the Bibliothèque royale (later called the Bibliothèque

⁴⁷ As Vitet put it, when citing Voltaire in a famous quote in which the French philosopher denied, in the late eighteenth century, that the French had ever produced great epics: “*Les Français, disait Voltaire, n’ont pas la tête épique*” (Vitet, “La chanson de Roland,” 863).

⁴⁸ Paris, “Paulin Paris et la littérature française du moyen âge,” 250.

⁴⁹ See Redman, *The Roland legend in nineteenth-century French literature*, 1–12.

⁵⁰ Nodier, “*Charlemagne, ou la Caroléiade*.” According to Redman, Nodier claimed that Roland was a hero of whom every Frenchman should be proud, but we have not been able to find this reference in the corresponding article (Redman, *The Roland legend in nineteenth-century French literature*, 3).

⁵¹ Michel, *La chanson de Roland ou de Roncevaux du XIIIe siècle*, v.

⁵² *Ibid.*, v–vi. Paulin Paris’s *lettre* was published as an introduction to his 1832 edition of *Li romans de Berte aus grans piés* (reprinted in 1836).

nationale).⁵³ He started his dissertation by asserting that the *chanson* had never been published in a modern edition, not even in extracts, expressing his hope that his work would arouse interest in the poem, one of the greatest epics ever written. Although his choice of a manuscript to edit was later considered a poor one, as the manuscripts from the Bibliothèque royale were not as old as other surviving manuscripts (then still undiscovered), his work nevertheless constituted the first French academic attempt to illuminate issues such as the date, authorship, the possible oral character of epic narration, and the form and style of the poem.⁵⁴ Even though Monin's thesis contributed little to what scholars knew about the so-called *Roman de Roncevaux*, it did arouse interest as to which manuscript should be used for an edition of the poem, and why the *chanson* was such an important text. Paulin Paris, for example, declared the importance of Roland to the understanding of French national culture in the early 1830s. Similarly, in a supportive review of Monin's dissertation, Francisque Michel affirmed:

*L'étude des monuments de notre ancienne littérature se poursuit avec ardeur. La vieille Université elle-même, renonçant, pour la première fois, à ses banalités grecques et latines, a permis à l'un de ses fils de porter des regards investigateurs sur un roman du cycle de Charlemagne. C'est un progrès immense et qui mérite d'être remarqué.*⁵⁵

The Greek and Latin banalities representing classical studies to which Michel referred, having dominated intellectual output during the previous century, were finally to be replaced by research on the history of France itself. The importance of Monin's text went beyond the simple copying of a text; for Michel, Monin's dissertation was a true scientific work, being “*en tout point fort remarquable, tant sous celui de la science philologique*

⁵³ Monin, *Dissertation sur le roman de Roncevaux*. Monin's choice for manuscripts, clearly based on the only manuscripts he could find, was not a happy one. He used manuscripts from the Royal Library, which were formerly known as Versailles and Paris. The last two, however, were not medieval manuscripts, but copies of the original manuscripts which Guyot des Herbiers had donated to the Bibliothèque nationale in 1818, after he had used the original texts to prepare an edition of *Roland* which he never published (Redman, *The Roland legend in nineteenth-century French literature*, 5–6).

⁵⁴ Monin, *Dissertation sur le roman de Roncevaux*, 69.

⁵⁵ Michel, *Examen critique de la dissertation de M. Henri Monin sur le roman de Roncevaux*, 5.

et des connaissances historiques que l'auteur déploie à tout moment en y joignant des considérations philosophiques très élevées."⁵⁶

In 1833, enthused by rumours, traced to the Abbé Gervais de la Rue,⁵⁷ that the oldest surviving manuscript of the *chanson* resided in England, Francisque Michel wrote a letter to François Guizot, then minister of public instruction, asking to be assigned to an official mission to England with government funds.⁵⁸ Michel spent three years in England (first in London, searching the archives of the British Library, then in Oxford, where he found the Digby 23 manuscript of *La chanson de Roncevaux*). His *editio princeps* of the poem, published in 1837, reveals the advances in literary and textual criticism in early nineteenth-century France. Michel's 1837 text was the first modern edition of *La chanson de Roncevaux*, which he renamed *La chanson de Roland*, and it served as a basis for all other editions until the 1870s.

Michel's edition was compiled based on Michel's understanding of the values that the poem itself exalted (honour, love for one's country, spirituality); these, Michel thought, were extremely important at that particular moment in French history, as they had been in medieval France.⁵⁹ *La chanson de Roncevaux*, which was the culmination of Michel's three-year travels and an enormous amount of work, was, in a sense, the first meaningful example of the impact of French nationalism on medieval studies. His efforts should certainly not be dismissed as unimportant, as the generation of Paul Meyer and Gaston Paris, seeing itself as the first to study medieval literature in a scientific manner, tended to do.⁶⁰

There can be no doubt that Michel's text was an important part of the process of the popularisation of *La chanson de Roland* in France. His edition included a glossary and an index, and provided a critical introduction contextualising Roland studies in French academia. Two other editions soon followed: one by Jean-Louis Bourdillon (1840), the other by François Génin (1850). The myth of Roland as the ultimate French hero, as well as the subject of the most important French epic ever

⁵⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁷ A French Revolution *émigré* who took up residence in England.

⁵⁸ Bédier, "De l'édition princeps de *La chanson de Roland* aux éditions les plus récentes," 468–9.

⁵⁹ As will become clearer below, the problems left by the French Revolution of 1789, such as a lack of trust in rationalism and religious values, oriented scholarly production in the 1830s.

⁶⁰ Meyer, "La chanson de Roland et le roman de Roncevaux des XII^e et XIII^e siècles, par Fr. Michel," 228–33; Roach, "Francisque Michel," 168–78.

written, progressively gained popularity among academics, if not, as yet, the general public. It can be argued that medieval studies were never so detached from the general public as they were in this period; they had never been more institutional, in the sense that they were done by and for a small group of specialised people with similar interests. It is therefore inaccurate to claim that medieval studies before 1870 were not institutional.⁶¹ Those who support this claim are being seduced by the arguments of Gaston Paris's generation, that is, that medieval studies in France only became a true discipline when Germanic scholarship was adopted in the late 1860s, rather than basing their claims on close examination of scholarly work before 1870. In addition to this, modern scholars have also placed too great an emphasis on the scientific character of the humanities as a means of validating the findings of previous generations, thus understanding the work of early and mid-nineteenth-century scholars out of its intellectual context.

In this early stage of French philological studies, a large part of a scholar's work was to identify, catalogue and translate manuscripts, and the case of *La chanson de Roland* can be seen as representative of the work of this period. This concern with textual reproductions of particular manuscripts rather than critical editions (which came later) led to a number of debates that also reveal the thinking of philologists in this particular period. In the 1870s, scholars came to view these debates as highly dated and not at all significant for medieval studies. However, they are of interest to us now because they illustrate an attitude towards medieval studies which was both professional and institutional, even if their debates seem rather peculiar today. For example, it had been a complicated task to establish that the Digby 23 manuscript was the oldest version of *La chanson de Roland*. This also created problems of ownership regarding that manuscript, as illustrated in the argument between Paulin Paris and François Génin regarding Génin's 1850 edition of the *Chanson*. Two years after the 1848 revolution, when most scholars were struggling to find funding for their books, François Génin's glorious *La chanson Roland* appeared.

Génin's *Roland* was controversial because he did not put together a proper edition of *La chanson de Roland*, in the sense that he never actually used a manuscript to produce his work. Instead, he simply used Michel's edition, correcting it to make the poem more beautiful, as he claimed, and

⁶¹ See Bloch, "842: The first document and the birth of medieval studies," 12–13; Glencross, *Reconstructing Camelot*, 62–5.

then translating it into modern French.⁶² Instead of using the original versification, Génin made changes to it, transforming verses with ten syllables into blank verse. His text was not a scholarly edition, but rather a sophisticated recreation of the poem, although its format (an expensive leather-bound book) made it look professional and of superior quality when compared with Michel's text, which had been published at his own expense with a cheaper cover.

In the eyes of his colleagues, Génin had forged an edition of France's national poem. The controversy was a turning point in the production of textual editions in nineteenth-century France. Paulin Paris, in an angry article in 1851, criticised Génin for having used Michel's text without thanking him formally, as he should have done. When writing about recent editions of *La chanson de Roland* and their significance for philological studies in France, Paulin Paris emphasised that there had already been two editions of that poem (Michel's, based on the Digby manuscript, and Bourdillon's, based on the Châteauroux manuscript), and how unnecessary a third edition (in this case, Génin's *Roland*) would be.⁶³ For him, and this was a weakness of early nineteenth-century textual criticism, there was very little original criticism and revision of previous editing to be made when a scholar edited a text that had already been edited, because the edition was based on a scholar's expertise on the field. If the scholar's reputation had been established, it was fruitless to look for flaws in his edition.⁶⁴ For Paulin Paris, Michel's achievement in reading, translating, editing and publishing the Oxford manuscript had been an authentic literary and philological enterprise. Génin, on the other hand, had done nothing except copy Michel's edition and modify, to his liking, pieces of the text with which he did not agree. Moreover, Paris insisted that:

*Nous irons plus loin: le texte d'Oxford, rapporté par M. Michel, et publié somptueusement à ses dépens, appartenait à celui qui l'avait transcrit et mis en lumière. Personne n'avait droit de le reproduire sans l'agrément de ce premier éditeur. ... le premier éditeur d'un manuscrit a droit de propriété sur le texte qu'il a publié.*⁶⁵

⁶² This was, Bloch claimed, a common characteristic of mid-nineteenth-century philological activity, correcting rather than composing (Bloch, "Du bon et du bon marché," 184). Nevertheless, it provoked some hard feelings between old friends Paulin Paris, Génin and Michel.

⁶³ Génin, *La chanson de Roland*.

⁶⁴ Paris, P., "La chanson de Roland (édition de M. F. Génin)," 304–5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 305–6.

Although Paulin Paris's demand for an editor's copyright did not succeed in giving the first editor of a manuscript the legal status of an author, it nevertheless had an important effect: a differentiation was now made between a scholarly philological edition (based on a manuscript source) and the literary recreation of a text (based on an earlier edition). From that point on, no other legitimate and recognised edition was ever made using anything other than a manuscript source. This in itself was an important step in pre-1870 academic medievalism.

Paulin Paris's views on an editor's task, strange as they seem to modern readers, well used to the various different critical editions of a text, were nevertheless in line with the actual task of editing at his time: an editor was supposed to copy the text of his chosen manuscript.⁶⁶ The steps of the editor's work were to identify the existing manuscripts and their locations; read them and decide which was the best one; then copy the manuscript and, in order to make it more readable, provide a glossary of terms and an index. In this sense, Paulin Paris was making an explicit criticism of the previous generation of editors, whose work had consisted of simply copying and correcting manuscripts and editions, thus basically repeating the same work over and over. His argument about the lack of a need for several editions of the same text was a point that Gaston Paris and his generation of philologists would criticise when they introduced the new Lachmanian method in their own critical editions.⁶⁷

The controversy about François Génin's edition of *Roland* carried on into the 1860s. In Francisque Michel's 1869 edition of *Roland*, he bitterly criticised Génin's 1850 edition for its lack of respect towards himself and

⁶⁶ Paul Meyer, when writing Michel's obituary in 1887, was not very forgiving of this "flaw" of early nineteenth-century philological activities (Meyer, "M. Francisque Michel," 166).

⁶⁷ The "scientific method," also called "Lachmanian method" or simply "the new method," is the way in which nineteenth-century French scholars referred to Karl Lachmann's method of textual editing. When studying the classics in the 1830s, Lachmann had claimed that if one took a poem and compared it to other versions of it, one would inevitably find discrepancies in the narrative, which would then allow the identification of the original poem (the simplest one) and the later versions of it (the more complex ones). In theory, it was a matter of identifying manuscripts that were alike and attributing them to a family of manuscripts. Once the oldest surviving manuscript was found, one could analyse it, as it provided the true basis of historical/literary knowledge. Nineteenth-century French scholars such as Gaston Paris followed his method when creating, from 1869, what they considered to be "scientific editions" of medieval texts, thus incorporating elements from the surviving manuscripts to ensure the best and most accurate edition.

for stealing his rights to *Roland* by re-editing it.⁶⁸ This bitterness did not subside until Paul Meyer published his review of Michel's new edition, offering nothing but damning criticism of Michel's new text;⁶⁹ after that, Michel himself did not attempt to re-establish the dignity of his own work. Although not sure of the applicability of the scientific method to all medieval texts, Paul Meyer did advocate the application of the method to certain texts, as is clear from his extremely harsh criticism of Michel's re-edition of *La chanson de Roland* in 1869,⁷⁰ and his equally harsh criticism of Potvin's *Perceval*.⁷¹ Although he had doubts regarding the use of the scientific method to the *chansons de geste*, Meyer chastised Michel for publishing yet another edition of *Roland* which did not meet the required scientific standards and was in all ways inferior to Theodor Müller's edition of *Roland* published in 1863:

*La méthode qui a renouvelé la critique des écrits de l'antiquité a été appliquée, dans la mesure du possible, aux œuvres du moyen-âge ... Autrefois, quand on avait copié avec soin le meilleur manuscrit connu, quand on avait corrigé les fautes les plus grossières à l'aide d'un autre manuscrit, on croyait avoir assez fait pour l'établissement du texte. Maintenant, cela ne suffit plus: il faut classer les manuscrits par familles et choisir d'après des caractères internes la meilleure leçon, sans se préoccuper outre mesure de l'ancienneté plus ou moins grande du manuscrit.*⁷²

Michel, in not using genealogical trees of manuscripts,⁷³ had committed a crime against science, and was therefore publicly humiliated by Meyer, who affirmed that "*quiconque n'est pas disposé à entreprendre ce travail*

⁶⁸ Michel, *La chanson de Roland et le roman de Roncevaux des XII^e et XIII^e siècles*, xviii–xix.

⁶⁹ Meyer, "La chanson de Roland et le roman de Roncevaux des XII^e et XIII^e siècles, par Fr. Michel," 228–33.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 231–3.

⁷¹ Meyer, "Chrestien de Troyes," 129–37.

⁷² Meyer, "La chanson de Roland et le roman de Roncevaux des XII^e et XIII^e siècles, par Fr. Michel," 228.

⁷³ The genealogical trees were an integral part of Lachmann's method as interpreted by Paris and his contemporaries. In finding and classifying surviving manuscripts of a medieval text, the scholar would have enough evidence to create a genealogical tree for the text in which all manuscripts are incorporated, showing the oldest version, the newest version, and the influences of some versions over others. Michel's faux pas was to have restricted himself to the use of one manuscript, thus, in Meyer's opinion, impoverishing the activity of the textual editor and the quality of the edition published as a result of his research.

doit abdiquer toute prétention à donner une nouvelle édition du Roland."⁷⁴ Finding in Michel's use of the manuscript of the Bibliothèque impériale, the one which he called *La Chanson de Roncevaux*, the only positive aspect of his edition, Meyer virtually proscribed Michel's text for anyone interested in a scientific edition of *La chanson de Roland*.

Today, this whole controversy seems like a minor issue, partly because the late nineteenth-century scholars made it seem so and modern medievalists have adopted their view. Yet, at the time, this was a huge step forward in medieval studies. For the first time, what was scientifically valid in terms of an academic edition of a medieval text was contrasted with something that was not scientific. This point, overlooked by academics in the 1870s and those of today, was the basis of the understanding of medieval texts by scholars in the period 1830–70. It was evident that scholars at that time saw medieval manuscripts as modern texts, in the sense that they had authors and copyrights as modern texts have. They did not realise that in their literary and textual criticism they were actually adopting two different notions regarding authorship.⁷⁵ In fact, there was no copyright in the Middle Ages because the notion of an author in the modern sense did not yet exist. In the nineteenth century, however, the notion of an author was clear, and copyright laws were created to protect authors' rights. Seeing medieval literature as similar to modern literature, as early as 1850, scholars modified how one should approach a medieval manuscript.

It was from this point that academics started emphasising what was scientific, a development that was to allow Gaston Paris and his generation to refine their definitions of what was (and was not) scientific research in the 1860s and 70s. Even now, it is a complicated matter for literary critics and textual criticism whether all the different versions of a poem should or should not be incorporated into a critical edition. The issue of making all versions available in a critical edition and scrutinising the reception of each version and the reasons for the versions themselves is one which still pits scholars against each other. It can be said of course that the best edition (a selective or an all-inclusive one) depends on the readership, as different readers will seek different elements in their critical editions. This debate did not cross the minds of scholars in Gaston Paris's time. In the

⁷⁴ Meyer, "La chanson de Roland et le roman de Roncevaux des XII^e et XIII^e siècles, par Fr. Michel," 231.

⁷⁵ As Cerquiglini noticed, it was the 1793 law (in which the rights of an author were expressed in a way that his name had to appear on the cover of the book he authored) that indicated the birth of the "modern text" (Cerquiglini, *Éloge de la variante*, 27–8).

last four decades of the nineteenth century, offering all versions and showing a hierarchy of versions was the only option for a good critical edition; this is where the expertise of philologists and critics could be applied. As a result, nineteenth-century editions are still used as reference for modern editions, but no special attention is given to the reasons why nineteenth-century editions were compiled in the way they were.

Aside from the controversy around editing *Roland*, one of the earliest major studies of *La chanson de Roland* was that by Ludovic Vitet, published in the 1852 edition of *Revue des deux mondes*. Clearly aimed at an educated public, Vitet's article was the first to raise the issue of whether *Roland* had a popular or individual authorship.⁷⁶ In his analysis, Vitet anticipated several issues that were to intrigue philologists and literary critics up to the present day: which aspects of *Roland* are fictional and which are historical? Why was the poem not lost over time? Vitet went further and, analysing the plot, argued that *Roland* was the most coherent epic poem ever written in France, and that the unity of the composition of the text was a singular characteristic of that poem.⁷⁷ This idea was also, as we will see later, to be one of the main points of Gaston Paris's interpretation of *La chanson de Roland*.

In summary, it is incorrect to claim that little or no attention was given to medieval studies before 1870, as can easily be shown by the texts of Francisque Michel, Paulin Paris and their contemporaries. However, it is possible to say that before 1870, the interest in medieval studies was of a different *nature* when we compare them to studies after the Franco-Prussian War, and certainly was of a different *intensity*, as we will see.

The Crisis in Education, the Germanic Theories and the Epic

If, during the nineteenth century, France regarded herself as an old nation and pitied the German states for their lack of national unity, this viewpoint became particularly important in 1870, when French scholars saw the city of Paris besieged by the Germans and the French army losing the war against the enemy. "*Des le Xe siècle*," said Renan, in 1870, "*la Francia est toute nationale*."⁷⁸ In his opening lecture to the Collège de France in 1870, when the city of Paris was actually under Germanic siege, Gaston Paris echoed him, by saying:

⁷⁶ Vitet, "La chanson de Roland," 819.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 852.

⁷⁸ Renan, "La guerre entre la France et l'Allemagne," 82.

*Oui, messieurs, il y a huit siècles, alors qu'aucune des nations de l'Europe n'avait encore pris véritablement conscience d'elle-même, quand plusieurs d'entre elles, comme l'Angleterre, attendaient encore pour leur formation des éléments essentiels, la patrie française était fondée: le sentiment national existait dans ce qu'il a de plus intime, de plus noble et de plus tendre. C'est dans la Chanson de Roland qu'apparaît cette divine expression de 'douce France', dans laquelle s'est exprimé avec tant de grâce et de profondeur l'amour que cette terre aimable entre toutes inspirait déjà à ses enfants. Douce France! Les Allemands nous ont envié ce mot, et ont vainement cherché à en retrouver le pendant dans leur poésie nationale.*⁷⁹

Nevertheless, although they claimed that there was a long tradition of national unity, French academics realised that the 1789 revolution had presented a threat to that unity.⁸⁰ Not only had it almost divided the nation in two, *lettrées* and *illettrées*, but it had also highlighted the gap between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, making evident the need for social as well as educational reforms. As Fustel de Coulanges, an eminent historian, said, in an enraged article one year after the Franco-Prussian War:

*De là nous est venu un patriotisme d'un caractère particulier et étrange. Être patriote, pour beaucoup d'entre nous, c'est être ennemi de l'ancienne France. Notre patriotisme ne consiste le plus souvent qu'à honnir nos rois, à détester notre aristocratie, à médire de toutes nos institutions. Cette sorte de patriotisme n'est au fond que la haine de tout ce qui est français. Il ne nous inspire que méfiance et indiscipline; au lieu de nous unir contre l'étranger, il nous pousse tout droit à la guerre civile.*⁸¹

Coulanges was concerned about the Franco-Prussian War and the removal of the Old Regime in France, especially the institution of monarchy, of which he was so fond. His comments were, nevertheless, pertinent and expressed a central concern of French academics since the 1820s: how to put France back together after the horrors of the 1789 revolution? The project of reunifying the two Frances, the France of the aristocracy and the France of the bourgeoisie, was not generally viewed positively in French society. For scholars and politicians, it was essential to stimulate national consolidation. For this project, the Middle Ages were seen as a crucial period in French history because they seemed to reconcile the roles of the aristocracy, the Church, the emerging bourgeoisie and the

⁷⁹ Paris, "La chanson de Roland et la nationalité française," 107–8.

⁸⁰ Monod, "Introduction," 26.

⁸¹ Coulanges, "De la manière d'écrire l'histoire en France et en Allemagne depuis cinquante ans," 244.

political institution of the monarchy at the moment when France became a nation. Scholars recreated the Middle Ages as a nationalistic symbol, the *muse nationale*, in order to foster a feeling of affinity between divided Frenchmen. French scholars realised that the only way to help create a feeling of national identity was to tap into a communal idea of the French past that erased differences and focused, instead, on unity and cohesion. As a result, French scholars urgently started preaching that government and academia should popularise works that previously would have been considered the sole domain of *littérateurs*.

Again, this process must not be seen solely as a result of the Franco-Prussian War. After 1789 and, to a greater extent, the fall of the Napoleonic Empire (1804–14), historians turned to the past to concoct a shared national feeling. The works of Michelet, Thierry and many others represent this effort. In addition to this, in the 1830s and 40s there was an increased drive to improve primary, secondary and higher education in France, partly encouraged by envy of Germanic romantic philosophy and *Bildung*, which were blooming in the early nineteenth century. However, this drive remained more an ambition than a reality, as educational projects were not actually implemented until the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, in the mid-nineteenth century, the aim was to educate all Frenchmen, thereby establishing a true nation, because, as French scholars had learned from German romantics, only when all members of society share scientific knowledge does a true nation exist. This idea was to be central in the study of the medieval epic.

Another issue raised in the 1830s was the fact that French academics still felt the effects of the crisis of religious thought awakened by the 1789 revolution. In this sense, the intellectual project of rediscovering the Middle Ages was also a tribute to the moment when France became a Christian nation. Many members of the group of scholars who produced texts between 1810 and 1860 followed the idea of the Christian monarchy with passion. In consequence, debates between Catholics and secularists during the Second Empire presented a potential problem for contemporary educational projects. Should education be secular or religious? Disagreements between defenders of secular education (like Ernest Renan) and the advocates of Catholic education (like Léon Gautier) slowed the process of implementing a national curriculum. In itself, this would not have posed a problem, as most European countries did not have a national curriculum at that time. In France, however, this coincided with a lack of qualified teachers and the problems of access to rural areas which were

seen as necessary in order to educate the peasants and, using Weber's phrase, "turn them into Frenchmen."⁸²

Not only did the dispute between Catholics and secularists delay the process of standardisation of French education, it also set the tone for the analysis of epic poems such *La chanson de Roland* in the period 1830–60. Michel's 1837 edition of the poem (and its subsequent reprint of 1869) was a copy of the Oxford manuscript with an introduction that presented the poem as a Christian epic. For Michel, it was a poem about Christianity versus evil. By contrast, for Vitet, in his 1852 text on *Roland*, the poem was about the homeland and its national aspect was stronger than its religious sentiment.⁸³ Génin's 1850 translation of the text, although not biased towards a Christian viewpoint, was poor in terms of philological analysis and did not contribute much in terms of knowledge of the poem. The most remarkable aspect of his edition was that Génin was the only editor to have published *La chanson de Roland* with an author's name, Théroulde, the self-proclaimed author of the poem who names himself in the last verse of his text.⁸⁴ This action, which seems of little importance, was actually a step towards the dismissal of the mystic theories of authorship of medieval epics, which I will present below.

To summarise, before 1870 the questions that concerned French academics with regard to the epics were of a national nature (to prove that France had existed as a nation since medieval times) and a religious one (to show Christianity as the cohesive force in the establishment of that nation). Although scholars were already carrying out significant research in the field of medieval studies, their viewpoint was linked to the religious and political questions of the day, clearly showing the romantic approach to philological and historical investigation at that time, that is, if one sees political inclination as a characteristic of romantic thought, as critics were soon to do. However, these scholars claimed that both their methods and the knowledge they had achieved were scientific, which does not seem to be a traditional aspect of romantic scholarship. This problem goes beyond taxonomy. It is necessary to find the root of the idea that the methods used by scholars in the 1830s were romantic rather than based on science. The origins of this claim are to be found in the scholarly work of the period 1860–70, such as that by Paul Meyer, Gaston Paris and Léon Gautier (1832–97), who underlined the romantic character of the previous

⁸² Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 3–22.

⁸³ Vitet, "La chanson de Roland," 856.

⁸⁴ "'Deus,' dist li reis, 'si penuse est ma viel'/Pluret des oilz, sa barbe blanche tiret/Ci falt la geste que Turoldeus declinet" (vv. 4000–2), Bédier, ed. *La chanson de Roland*, 332.

generation in order to emphasise the supposedly scientific nature of their own work.

Which theories served as the basis for French methods and concepts of literary and textual criticism in the years 1830–60? Due to the lack of qualified medievalists in France, the study of the epic at that time was based on the work of German romantics such as Friedrich Wolf, the Brothers Grimm and Karl Lachmann. There were two reasons for this increased interest in and use of Germanic scholarship. First, in the 1820s and 30s, very few French scholars could read German, so their knowledge of Germanic theories was limited to a few French commentators of Germanic texts, which increased a curiosity about what was happening in German academia. Second, scholars in the late 1840s (the period when Gaston Paris grew up) had learned that it was imperative for medieval scholars to learn the German language and become acquainted with Germanic sources. Therefore, in the 1850s and 60s, French scholars started being able to read and discuss German scholars' work at first hand, introducing them to the Parisian intellectual centres.

One of the German authors who gained popularity in France in the 1850s was Friedrich Wolf, whose theories were expressed in his *Prolegomena ad Homerum*. Wolf challenged the assumption of the unity of authorship of Homeric poems, claiming instead that they were an collection of smaller poems composed by several different poets and later put together by Homer. German academics in the late 1700s viewed this concept as accepting Giambattista Vico's idea that Homer as an individual author had never existed, and that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, having been written in the heroic age, were products of popular knowledge, not an individual poet.⁸⁵

The “metaphysical authorship” of epics was a complex theory put forward in the 1820s by the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. They claimed that epic poems were created by a metaphysical process of accumulation of popular knowledge, and not by the hands of an individual poet. This mystical theory of “non-authorship” of medieval epics can be summarised by Jacob Grimm's words: “*La véritable épopée est celle qui se compose elle-même; elle ne doit être écrite par aucun poète.*”⁸⁶ As Joseph Bédier later explained, for Herder and Grimm, all epic works belonged to a period “*où la fonction créatrice n'est pas déléguée à des poètes individuels, mais appartient à la conscience collective de la nation tout entière, où 'l'épopée se compose elle-même,' par une 'nécessité*

⁸⁵ Lang, *Homer and the epic*, 58.

⁸⁶ As cited in Bréal, *Pour mieux connaître Homère*, 1.

intérieure,' et ne doit être l'œuvre d'aucun poète."⁸⁷ Not having a sole author, epic poems had a special kind of author, that is, the entire nation, who independently of time and place would be able to relate to the text and have their national feeling reinforced.

In 1816, Karl Lachmann applied Wolf's theories on classical epics to the *Nibelungenlied*, concluding that this medieval poem was also formed from a number of earlier works, and that it had been put together by a poet only at a late stage of its existence.⁸⁸ Lachmann called this theory *Liedertheorie*, the belief that any epic was actually a collection of smaller poems (*Lieder*) that the whole nation knew as songs. This theory of the triple character of epics (characterised as a collection of small poems known by all; produced not by an individual, but by the people; and transmitted orally with accuracy) was first developed by the Germans but was soon adopted by the French, who used it in their own analyses of the medieval epic. Indeed, these ideas soon became popular all over Europe. Following this theory, scholars viewed medieval epics as having been produced in the early Middle Ages by the whole nation, and then transmitted orally with precise accuracy, until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when they were put into a written form. As linguist Michel Bréal explained when studying the origins of Wolf's ideas (ideas which he himself was attempting to reject):

*L'opinion qui a prévalu, et qui règne aujourd'hui dans la science, c'est que des chants, des cantilènes sur un même sujet, provoqués par quelque grand événement, naissant spontanément sur différents points, se répandent, se propagent, puis finissent par susciter un poète que les réunit, les met en ordre, et les présente ainsi assemblés en une grande composition. Telle aurait été l'origine des chants homériques, telle serait celle de tous les poèmes auxquels on peut donner le nom d'épopée.*⁸⁹

This view of the epic as a supreme manifestation of the consciousness of the nation gained widespread currency in the nineteenth century, perhaps because the idea of a spiritual link between members of the same nation was popular, being a catalyst for the very idea of nationality. This was true in Germany as well as in the Italian states, Iceland and England,⁹⁰ as well as in France. In all these nations, the study of the epic as their national literary style was taking on a popularity that had been the preserve of the

⁸⁷ Bédier, *Les légendes épiques*, III, 271.

⁸⁸ For a parallel study on the *Nibelungenlied* to that offered here on Roland and the epic, see Thorp, *The study of the Nibelungenlied*.

⁸⁹ Bréal, *Pour mieux connaître Homère*, 109.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians* and Haarder, *Beowulf*.

classics. Another reason for the increased popularity of the epic was the existence of racist theories, which asserted that there were singular characteristics in each race that made some races superior to all others. As an Aryanist, Bréal could not but believe that the epic genre was the manifestation of the spirit of the Aryan race in its purest form. In his own analysis of Homeric poems, he stressed that according to Vico and Wolf, “*En chacun [of the epics] vivaient les forces réunies de toute la nation ... Il en était de la poésie comme du langage: ce fut le travail commun de tous.*”⁹¹ Bréal himself discarded the idea of the mystical authorship of epics, “poems without a poet,” years later. Although he believed that long works, such as the *Iliad*, must have had several authors, he now saw these authors as individuals in their own right, not merely as metaphysical manifestations of the national spirit.

German intellectual scholarship was thus important for European scholars at this time, not only because of its volume in terms of works of literature, philology, philosophy and history, but also because German scholars, such as the Brothers Grimm and Wolf, succeeded in codifying contemporary abstract and practical knowledge and consolidating it into academic theories. In that sense, the crisis of French Enlightenment and rational philosophy also shaped an increased interest in mystical and metaphysical interpretations. The import of German ideas by French scholars was not, therefore, surprising. Before 1870, France looked up to Germany as an intellectual ally, not as an enemy. If one nation was envious of the other for one reason or another, they had not, until 1870, engaged in open conflict. However, after 1870, Renan’s dream of achieving the “*alliance intellectuelle, morale et politique de l’Allemagne et de la France*” was shattered, and, as he said, “*un abîme est creusé entre la France et l’Allemagne.*”⁹² If French scholars saw the Germany they envied becoming stronger and stronger, they were able to disguise their own shame and jealousy by defaming Germany and its people: “*ce que nous aimions dans l’Allemagne, sa largueur, sa haute conception de la raison et de l’humanité, n’existe plus.*”⁹³

Full of resentment, Renan went further, stating that “*la victoire de l’Allemagne ... ç’a été la victoire de la science et de la raison; mais ç’a été en même temps la victoire de l’ancien régime.*”⁹⁴ If one of the proud outcomes of the 1789 revolution had been the overthrow of the Old Regime in France, in Germany the social structure was still that of the old

⁹¹ Bréal, *Pour mieux connaître Homère*, 23.

⁹² Renan, “Préface” to *La réforme intellectuelle et morale*, 2–3.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁴ Renan, “La réforme intellectuelle et morale de la France,” 39.

monarchy and nation-state. French scholars argued that although German scholars had made great advances intellectually, German society was not ready for science because it lacked democratic values. Therefore, for Renan and his contemporaries, France was still more advanced than Germany; all she needed in order to become stronger than her neighbour and enemy was to concentrate her efforts on the acquisition of science. As Renan put it: “*La manque de foi à la science est le défaut profond de la France.*”⁹⁵ However, this deficiency could be corrected, as long as the educational system was reformed.

This shift in the political situation after 1870 is the key to the evident change between pre- and post-1870 work on the epic. After 1870, emphasis was placed on the national and patriotic character of poems such as *La chanson de Roland*, meaning that the main change in the study of the epic after 1870 lies in the fact that scholars now stressed the need for the creation of a proper methodology as the basis of academic study. To be scientific was no longer a choice for scholars. Rather, it was a duty. Scientific output was the only reason for the existence of French academia, and it soon became, for academics at least, the reason for the existence of France itself. This is exemplified in Gaston Paris’s words:

*Je ne crois pas, en général, que le patriotisme ait rien à démêler avec la science. Les chaires de l’enseignement supérieur ne sont à aucun degré des tribunes; c’est les détourner de leur véritable destination que de les faire servir à la défense ou à l’attaque de quoi que ce soit en dehors de leur but spirituel. Je professe absolument et sans réserve cette doctrine, que la science n’a d’autre objet que la vérité, et la vérité pour elle-même, sans aucun souci des conséquences bonnes ou mauvaises, regrettables ou heureuses, que cette vérité pourrait avoir dans la pratique. Celui qui, par un motif patriotique, religieux et même moral, se permet dans les faits qu’il étudie, dans les conclusions qu’il tire, la plus petite dissimulation, l’altération la plus légère, n’est pas digne d’avoir sa place dans le grand laboratoire où la probité est un titre d’admission plus indispensable que l’habileté.*⁹⁶

In conclusion, after 1870, most academics advocated the use of science in preference to romantic interpretations of the epics, making the discourse on scientism (then called positive science) inseparable from that of nationalism. Calling attention to the search for truth and the “*science sans patrie*,” they used positivism as a rhetorical act, as a resource to legitimise medieval studies by giving them a scientific character. Yet, as we have

⁹⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁹⁶ Paris, “*La chanson de Roland et la nationalité française*,” 90.

seen, scholars never really defined what they meant by the expression *science positive* in mid- and late nineteenth-century Parisian academia, although they all seemed to understand what it meant. As a result, French scholars continued to use romantic authors and their theories, especially German ones, as the basis for their studies of the epic. This problem was particularly evident during the years 1870–90, when French academics had to choose between using Germanic knowledge and preserving their own national science.

Gaston Paris and the Epic

*Aussi une race jeune renouvelait un monde vieilli, et, en le faisant retomber momentanément dans la barbarie, l'ignorance et la brutalité, préparait en même temps une évolution qu'il semblait incapable d'accomplir. Grâce à l'adoption du catholicisme par les Francs, il se forma entre eux et les Romains de Gaule une véritable unité des sentiments, et pour la première fois, depuis l'éclair passager qu'avait allumé Vercingétorix, une conscience nationale s'éveilla dans notre pays. Au point de vue littéraire, le résultat fut l'épopée. L'épopée française est le produit de la fusion de l'esprit germanique, dans une forme romane, avec la nouvelle civilisation chrétienne et surtout française.*⁹⁷

*Jamais on n'a plus aimé la France que ne l'aimèrent l'auteur de notre Roland et les poètes ses contemporains.*⁹⁸

So far, I have sought to show how medieval studies in France emerged between 1820 and 1860 as a result of the crisis of the rationalistic philosophy and the renewed interest in history as a way of creating national cohesion. I have also outlined the shift in the conception of medieval studies provoked by the Franco-Prussian War. Now I will explore in detail the nature of the changes which took place in medieval studies between 1820 and 1860 and then 1870 and 1900, concentrating in particular on Gaston Paris's early texts on the epics and the beginnings of the project of literary criticism and philology in nineteenth-century France. Paris had begun studying French epics in the late 1850s, after completing his bachelor's dissertation on French phonetics.⁹⁹ Having spent a year in

⁹⁷ Paris, *La littérature française du moyen âge*, 25.

⁹⁸ Gautier, *Les épopées françaises*, I, 159.

⁹⁹ Paris, *Essai sur le rôle de l'accent Latin dans la langue française*.

Germany,¹⁰⁰ German authors such as Wolf, the Brothers Grimm and Lachmann inevitably influenced his ideas, and Paris used much of their analysis in his own assessment of medieval epics.

Paris's doctoral thesis, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne* (1865), was particularly innovative in French academia, in that it brought together philological analysis, literary criticism and historical investigation. In the 1830s, his father, Paulin Paris, who had been responsible for the volume of *Histoire littéraire de la France*¹⁰¹ dedicated to medieval epics, started the research on the cycle of Charlemagne that his son would finish in the 1860s. As previously noted, Paulin Paris found, catalogued, studied and translated medieval epics from the collection of the Royal Library. Paulin Paris's work was, in Gaston Paris's view, a tribute to the beauty and importance of those texts. The elder Paris had intended to popularise unknown texts which had been lost for centuries but which, in his view, were an important part of the French cultural heritage.¹⁰² Yet, for his son, Paulin Paris's work did not provide a critical edition of medieval epics and thus was unscientific according to the standards of Gaston Paris's generation.

In contrast to his father, Gaston Paris's ambitions were not to popularise medieval studies.¹⁰³ Rather, his work on the history of Charlemagne using medieval poems as a source was an attempt at philological analysis using the methods he had learned in Germany under Friedrich Diez. The young Paris proposed to gain new historical knowledge from Carolingian texts, not just to explain them to a popular audience. It is interesting that Nichols suggested that Gaston Paris's understanding of history was not a Rankean one, and that Paris was open to understanding the history of literature as separately from "factual

¹⁰⁰ Gaston Paris studied in Bonn, Germany, 1856–57. There is controversy as to why he went there, whether to learn the language or the methods of philological research (see Ridoux, *Évolution des études médiévales*, 44–5).

¹⁰¹ Started by the Benedictines of Saint-Maur in 1733, several volumes were published until the 1789 revolution. After an interval, the *Histoire* started to be published again in the early nineteenth century, under the auspices of Victor le Clerc (Ridoux, *Évolution des études médiévales*, 314–18).

¹⁰² See Paris, "Paulin Paris et la littérature française du moyen âge," 253.

¹⁰³ See, for example, Gaston Paris's preface to his 1874 edition of "Aucassin et Nicolette," in which he wished to popularise that particular poem (comparable in his opinion to *La chanson de Roland*) as an important French literary landmark: "*L'une et l'autre ont droit de figurer dans notre grand musée national, objets non seulement de curiosité pour l'archéologue, mais d'admiration pour l'artiste et de jouissance pour le spectateur*" (Paris, "Aucassin et Nicolette," 112).

history.”¹⁰⁴ It seems to me that Gaston Paris not only saw history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, but he also believed that literature was likely to represent a factual narrative of historical accounts. This is particularly evident in Paris’s views on the epic genre and the *fabliaux*, although not so much in his considerations on the Arthurian cycle. The point here is that for Paris, literature offered the clue to a long-lost past by presenting evidence which, when examined philologically and historically, could help recreate past events of French history.

To that end, Paris occupied himself with the epic genre. In the early 1860s, he had compared the French epics *Huon de Bordeaux* (in which the hero is permitted to return from the dead to perform a number of impossible tasks) and *La chanson de Roland* (in which Roland’s task is one which would eventually and inevitably lead to his death) with *Ortnit* and the *Nibelungenlied*, and inferred important parallels between French and German epics. In his doctoral text, however, Paris restricted himself to the French epics, specifically the cycle of Charlemagne. He intended to prove four basic hypotheses. First, that the origin of the French epic was both Germanic and Latin. Second, that the epics that survived from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had actually been written as early as the eighth century. Third, that the *cantilènes* (or warrior’s songs) had been the basis for the plots of the epics. Finally, that epic poems had been transmitted orally during five centuries with accuracy and precision. His theories combined what his student Joseph Bédier later called the “theory of the dual origins” and the “theory of the *cantilènes*.”

Gaston Paris’s theories on the Carolingian cycle and epics in general are of interest here because they allow us to see how Paris sought to combine pre-1860s French scholarship on the subject with German scholarship. Likewise, a study of Gaston’s work on the epic enables one to identify his own new insights, so as to make romantic knowledge (German, dating from the early 1800s) and scientific knowledge (also German, dating from the 1820s) converge with knowledge of a scientific-positivistic type (fully French). At times, Paris was clearly subscribing to a romantic viewpoint, approach and conclusion; but, at other times, Paris rejected romantic ideas and emphasised his scientific-positivistic inclinations. Concerning Paris’s analyses on the epics, it becomes clear that Paris was more scientific, by the standards of the time, when analysing the historical aspects of the creation of the epics in the medieval period, whereas he was romantic, again, by the time’s standards, when he turned to literary criticism and philological analysis. However, in both

¹⁰⁴ See Nichols, “Gaston Paris et le sens de l’histoire,” 162-5.

cases, he was an adept of Germanic theories and used a philological approach to the evolution of the human mind and stressed the need to search for original manuscripts.

Paris structured his historical argument in his study of the medieval epics of the Carolingian cycle¹⁰⁵ on the question of origins. In the 1830s, Paulin Paris had claimed that French epics were solely of French origin, not having been influenced by foreign elements. Rejecting his father's premise, Gaston Paris affirmed that the French epic originated from the Frankish epic, which was a product of the ancestors of the French people. In his view, this transition became possible when the Gallo-Roman population became Germanised in the eighth century during the migrations of peoples in Continental Europe. Although the French language and culture lost most of its Germanic characteristics during the ninth and tenth centuries, French epics were created under Germanic influence, ultimately being, therefore, half-German and half-Romance.¹⁰⁶ The German aspect of French epics remained in the spirit of these texts, namely the authors' love for the aristocracy and nobility and their courage and love for the nation. The Romance aspect of the text lived in the style, the form in which it was written, as he claimed:

*Les conditions de la naissance de l'épopée étaient les mêmes. Dans les deux pays [France and Germany] l'établissement des Germains avait donné naissance à une classe dominante, essentiellement guerrière, et qui, même quand elle eut abandonné sa langue originaire pour adopter l'idiome roman, dut conserver le goût héréditaire pour les chants épiques célébrant les exploits des anciens héros ou les combats auxquels elle prenait part.*¹⁰⁷

In Paris's viewpoint, when explaining the Germanisation of the French population during the earlier part of the Merovingian period, when the Germans and the Romans made contact, the newly created French people acquired characteristics from both. Likewise, German characters, like Siegfried, were popularised in France, where the people were more united territorially than in Germany (one of the elements which, in his opinion, had made France into a nation in medieval times). Paris claimed, as he always would do, that there had been a constant exchange between the two cultures that were to merge. By the eighth century, Paris argued, these two

¹⁰⁵ Some of the poems he examined were *Berte aux grands pieds*, *Fierabras*, *Roland*, *Huon de Bordeaux* and *Des gestes de Charlemagne*.

¹⁰⁶ Paris, "Le origini dell'epopea francese, indagate da Pio Rajna," 599.

¹⁰⁷ Paris, "Publications de la Société des anciens textes français (1872–1886)," 540.

cultures had effectively engendered the newborn French.¹⁰⁸ Thus the theory of the “dual origin of the French epic,” German in spirit and Romance in form, was born. This was one of Paris’s most questionable and questioned theories. For French scholars, it was painful to consider that the medieval epic, the newfound French national symbol par excellence, was only partly French.¹⁰⁹ In order to handle this apparently grim scenario, Paris claimed that once the nation had been founded, it did not matter from whence its component elements came, and that despite being a mixture of Celtic, Roman and Germanic elements, the French people were something completely new.¹¹⁰

In his “theory of the *cantilènes*,” which was also furiously debated during the years 1870–90, Paris claimed that medieval epics had been developed from earlier Merovingian epic songs (*cantilènes*), from which they eventually reached their written form. The fact that actual witnesses to historical events had sung these guaranteed their historical accuracy. Paris based his analysis on the theories of romantic German scholars such as the Brothers Grimm, particularly their theories concerning the origins of epics and their spread. For Paris, echoing Grimm, French epics express the general character of the French aristocracy:

*L'épopée a nécessairement un caractère général, c'est-à-dire qu'elle exprime l'idéal et les sentiments de la nation tout entière, ou au moins de la classe aristocratique et guerrière, comme en France - Elle est ordinairement belliqueuse, car la guerre contre l'étranger est ce qui donne aux hommes un enthousiasme commun et le sentiment de leur solidarité.*¹¹¹

Again repeating Grimm’s claims about the metaphysical authorship of the epic, Gaston Paris said that the poet’s style “*n’a rien d’individuel: c’est comme on l’a dit excellemment, un ‘style national’.*”¹¹²

In summary, Paris’s earlier work on medieval epics was based on the theories of German authors rather than those of French scholars such as his father.¹¹³ This is an important point because after 1870, most French

¹⁰⁸ Paris, *La littérature française du moyen âge*, 34–5.

¹⁰⁹ One must remember that until the early nineteenth century no scholar ever thought that the medieval epic was important or had a French origin. The importance of the epic was, as seen above, an innovation of the 1830 generation.

¹¹⁰ Paris, “Le origini dell’epopea francese, par Pio Rajna,” 599.

¹¹¹ Paris, *La littérature française*, 34.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Paulin Paris and Claude Fauriel believed that the origin of the French epic was *provençal*, as they also believed that the origin of the French language was Provençal. In analysing the Arthurian cycle and the cycle of Charlemagne, they

scholars were to return to earlier French work on the epic in order to demonstrate a supposed French superiority in dealing with manuscripts and popularising medieval history.

Concerning the origin of the epic as a literary genre, Paris paraphrased Grimm (without proper reference) in a quotation which was used afterwards by several scholars when debating the origin of French epics: “*Je sens dans ces épopées le souffle des forêts germaniques.*”¹¹⁴ Paris agreed with the Brothers Grimm that all medieval epics were of Germanic origin. He also claimed, like German scholars, that most of them were historically accurate. For Paris, historical texts produced legends (such as Roland), whereas fictional narratives produced myths (such as Tristan).¹¹⁵ In his investigation of the history of Charlemagne, Paris highlighted the difference between myth and legend in the epics, which was an issue of debate among literary critics, historians and philologists. One could surely infer several aspects of the provenance and date of a given text by analysing it in philological and literary terms, but how far could one stretch those conclusions to the elaboration of a true historical analysis? One must keep in mind that Paris saw his work on the epic as a search for historical truth. Because of this, he sought to identify the elements within the epics that would allow him to find the true history of France. He did not realise that in literary sources, and indeed in any source, one does not “find” truth, because sources can only provide possibilities of interpretations and hypothesis. Of course, some interpretations and hypotheses are more successful than others, depending on the amount of evidence found to support them, but they are still just interpretations. For Paris, on the other hand:

*L'époque à laquelle se développa l'épopée carolingienne n'était pas propre à la formation de mythes ... Là est la grande différence entre notre épopée et celles de l'Inde, de l'Iran et de la Grèce. Elle a germé, elle est née et elle a fleuri sur un sol tout historique.*¹¹⁶

Gaston Paris claimed that the epics which formed the cycle of Charlemagne could and should be seen as historical documents, although

inferred that Charlemagne's cycle was older than the Arthurian one and was truly French, whereas the Arthurian cycle was Celtic and therefore not truly French (Ridoux, *Évolution des études médiévales*, 24–5). See the particulars of this debate on Chapter Four.

¹¹⁴ Grimm as cited in Paris, “Le origini dell’epopea francese,” 599.

¹¹⁵ See Chapter Four for further explanation.

¹¹⁶ Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, 431–2.

he did not extend this belief to all French epics. For him, some epic stories (*épopées*) were mythical in nature, which meant that they had as a subject “une mythologie, plus ou moins oubliée comme telle, qu’elle transforme en histoire humaine, ou historique, c’est-à-dire qu’elle a pour base des événements réels plus ou moins altérés par l’imagination et certaines tendances.”¹¹⁷ Paris’s approach thus differed from that of Domenico Comparetti, an Italian literary critic who had a diverse interpretation of the historical truth behind medieval epics, one that was quite unusual in the nineteenth century. For Comparetti: “*Difficilissimo è nelle epopee popolari determinare donde vengano i nomi propri, particolarmente in quella parte di esse che, subordinata all’intento epico, è mero prodotto di fantasia.*”¹¹⁸ Claiming that epics and the events narrated therein were products of the poet’s imagination, Comparetti discarded any historical realism when studying medieval texts, always preferring an allegorical interpretation. In defence of his own viewpoint, Gaston Paris claimed that Comparetti’s stance was that of a literary critic, not a philologist, hence the divergence in their interpretations.

When comparing German and French epics in his early work on the Carolingian cycle, Paris focused on *Nibelungen* and *Roland*, and then *Ortnit* and *Huon de Bordeaux*. He emphasised the differences between the poems, arguing that the German texts were more beautiful as poems, but were less genuinely national than the French epics. The latter were thus true *Volk-Epos* (epics of the people), whereas German epics were mere artistic creations without national merit (*Kunst-Epos*, or artistic epics). For Paris, Grimm and Lachmann’s distinction between the popular epic and the artistic epic was the key to understanding the value of French and German epics:

¹¹⁷ Paris, *La littérature Française*, 33 (emphasis in original). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the question of whether epics were mythical or not came to be a complicated issue. The mythical aspect of a text was not a problem per se; the analysis of the *fabliaux* itself was based on the search for myths as original structures, which was considered a privileged and positivistic subject and method (see also Oergel, *The return of King Arthur and the Nibelungen*, 12). However, when it came to medieval epics, another difficulty emerged, that of the veracity of the texts. Being representative of historical events and the true national conscience of French people, if they were to be considered mythical, this would contrast with that same truthfulness of subject matter upon which French scholars insisted.

¹¹⁸ Comparetti, *Edipo e la mitologia comparata*, 81. “It is very difficult in popular epics to determine the origin of characters’ names, especially in those parts which are simply a product of imagination, despite their epic intention.” (The translation is mine.)

*Le Volk-Epos et le Kunst-Epos, l'épopée populaire et l'épopée artistique. La première est pour ainsi dire la voix d'une nation tout entière sur les lèvres d'un seul poète, simple reproducteur ou tout au plus arrangeur de traditions qui vivent dans le peuple ... La seconde est le résultat de l'imagination et de l'art d'un écrivain qui met à profit soit l'histoire, soit les légendes, mais qui a la conscience de ce qu'il fait, qui maîtrise son sujet, le taille, l'allonge, le façonne à sa fantaisie, et rapproche sa matière autant que possible de l'idéal esthétique qu'il entrevoit.*¹¹⁹

Going further, he claimed that by comparing the *Nibelungenlied* and *La chanson de Roland*, one could see that “les Nibelungen sont un poème humain, la Chanson de Roland est un poème national”¹²⁰ and that “On sent que ce que l'épopée allemande perd en force, en inspiration, en importance historique, elle le regagne en vérité, en intérêt et en valeur esthétique.”¹²¹ For the French epics, therefore, Paris rejected any claim to the artistic perfection possessed by works such as the *Nibelungenlied*. Furthermore, he claimed that in France the epics were written by and for the aristocracy, whereas in Germany an epic like the *Nibelungenlied* was truly popular, as they were written and sung by the people: “[The *Nibelungen*] il est supérieur à la Chanson de Roland; car ce n'était pas une certaine caste, c'était bien vraiment la nation tout entière qui trouvait dans les vers du poète l'expression idéale de tout ce qui constituait sa vie publique.”¹²²

For Paris, a further distinction between Germanic and French epics is that the former were what he called “individualistic,” while the latter were organic. “Organic” actually has two meanings here: first, poems sung and known by the whole nation and, second, contrary to Wolf and Lachmann's theories, poems composed in a unified manner, rather than simply being a compilation of earlier poems. In this sense, in the early 1860s, Paris vehemently affirmed that French epics were the product of one poet only.¹²³ When criticising Karl Bartsch's *Das Nibelungenlied* and the application of Lachmann's *Liedertheorie* to French epics, Paris further stated:

Autant l'hypothèse de Wolf sur les poèmes homériques a été fortifiée par l'éclatante application que Lachmann en fit à l'épopée germanique, autant elle est ébranlée par sa défaite sur ce même terrain. En France aussi on a

¹¹⁹ Paris, “Hun de Bordeaux,” 26–7.

¹²⁰ Paris, “La chanson de Roland et les Nibelungen,” 8.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 19–20.

¹²³ Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, 119.

*voulu y conformer nos chansons de gestes, et elles ont résisté. Il est à croire qu'un jour ou l'autre on s'étonnera d'avoir vu avec tant de confiance, dans l'Iliade une collection de chansons populaires. L'épopée n'est pas un produit tout à fait primitif; elle s'appuie, il est vrai, sur des chants héroïques antérieurs, mais elle les transforme en les appropriant; elle est un tout organique, qui s'est assimilé ses éléments, et non un assemblage fortuit de pièces de rapport.*¹²⁴

In his opinion, a proof of the organic character of French epics (organic in the sense of national, rather than focused on the individual) was that while in German epics, the fate of the hero was always the most important element in the narrative, in French epics, it was the nation as a whole that mattered.¹²⁵ This was to become a key point in his analysis of German literature in the late 1870s.

It is important to note that Gaston Paris never explicitly raised the issue of positivism (Comtean or not) in his early texts on epics, nor once in his doctoral thesis. Nevertheless, what he proposed was, in effect, a positivistic method to analyse the cycle of Charlemagne. For him, as he described his methodology and objectives:

*La tâche du travailleur, dans chaque branche d'études, est de rassembler le plus de faits possible, de les grouper suivant leurs affinités naturelles, de les caractériser, de dégager leurs principes générateurs, et d'apporter ainsi à la science universelle, œuvre commune de tous, la connaissance exacte du sujet qu'il s'est choisi.*¹²⁶

Paris's historical study of a literary genre was a new approach in mid-nineteenth-century France. As Ridoux said, Paris's aim in *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne* was to show the legendary aspects of Charlemagne's life, rather than the historical ones. Yet he did this because historically Charlemagne was the king of both the French and the Germans, thus the French had to share him with their German neighbours. However, as a legend, Charlemagne was fully French.¹²⁷ Paris's national

¹²⁴ Paris, "Deutsche Classiker des Mittelalters, par F. Pfeiffer and Das Nibelungenlied, par F. Bartsche," 187.

¹²⁵ Paris, "Littérature médiévale et littérature moderne," 10–11.

¹²⁶ Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, viii. To gather, group, explain, isolate and promote were the aims of Paris's generation, which was somewhere between Paulin Paris's (gather, group, summarise and popularise) and Bédier's, whose aim was neither to gather texts (most of them had already been found and catalogued) nor to explain them, but to analyse them.

¹²⁷ Ridoux, *Évolution des études médiévales*, 149.

pride drove him to study this particular king and period, and it was his position as a Frenchman that guided both his point of view and his methodology in his doctoral thesis. There was nothing neutral in his approach. Yet the subjective character of his research does not mean that it was not an excellent piece of work and one of the best of many nineteenth-century theses on history and literary criticism. In order to offer a historical analysis, Paris had to define his methods clearly, and this was one of the greatest merits of his text, because he produced his doctoral work at a time when an explicitly formulated methodology was not yet seen as a necessary part of academic work.

It becomes clear that while Paris was concerned to develop a scientific-positivistic methodology in the 1860s, he was also happy to use the ideas of romantic authors such as Grimm, Wolf and others, and that he saw no inconsistency in this process. Furthermore, he was concerned with the fundamental difference between France, which had been a nation since the eighth century, and Germany, which had only achieved national unity in the late nineteenth century. Paris's attitude was not one of open hostility; only after 1870 did French criticism of Germany's social structure and cultural status become more belligerent, as it became the means to enhance national pride against France's conqueror.

In conclusion, Paris's earliest work on the epic represents a particular stage of development of philological, literary and historical studies in France in which German authors influenced several of his theories. Yet at that point, neither Paris nor any of his contemporaries were too concerned with this influence or considered it to diminish French academia: once French scholars started producing scientific work, the problem of German influence would disappear. If there was intellectual friction between French and German scholars, this occurred because Germany possessed certain knowledge that France did not. Paris's study on the cycle of Charlemagne and his theories on the origin and transmission of French epics were extremely important, and they immediately triggered criticism and the development of new theories, as we shall see below.

Early Responses to Gaston Paris's Theories on the French Epic

Paris's ideas on the epic, innovative and provocative as they were, soon encountered criticism from his colleagues. First, he was criticised by Léon Gautier, lecturer at the École des chartes, and then by his friend Paul Meyer, then archivist at the Archives nationales, future professor at the Collège de France. Like Paris, Gautier used the distinction between *Volk-*

Epos and *Kunst-Epos*, seeing the former as natural, and the latter as artificial. For him, French epics were *Volk-Epos*, whereas epics from other nations were *Kunst-Epos*, thus lacking national merit.¹²⁸ In his opinion, religious and national unity happened to be the necessary conditions for epics to exist.¹²⁹ Being a supporter of Catholicism in France, Gautier naturally underlined the supposedly Christian aspect of medieval epics.

For Gautier, unlike Paris, the spirit that animated the French epic was that of feudality, which, in his opinion, was a fully Germanic or barbaric trait. This viewpoint, of course, was an opinion based not on historical analysis, but on a subjective inference about the supposed characteristics of the German people, who were still living under a mixture of feudal and Old Regime social and political structures. In Gautier's opinion, one could also identify the German nature of French epics in their representation of institutions, women and religion.¹³⁰ Unlike Paris, Gautier believed that French epics originally developed from lyric poetry, then passing to the stage of *cantilènes* and finally to the *chansons de geste*. Gautier's ideas on the origin and development of French epics were not very popular among French or foreign scholars. The German scholar Karl Bartsch criticised and ridiculed Gautier's theories, claiming that lyric poems had a different focus, and that they could never have been put into a rudimentary epic form (the *cantilena*) because they expressed different feelings and preoccupations.¹³¹

Gautier accepted Gaston Paris's theory of the spread of the *cantilènes*, although, as we have seen, he did not believe that these were the origin of the epics. He also claimed that the most important distinction between Merovingian epics (*cantilènes*) and Capetian epics (*chansons de geste*) was that the people sang the former, while professional *jongleurs* sung the latter.¹³² The main point of his second volume of *Les épopées françaises* is to explain the professionalisation of the *jongleurs*.

The second major criticism of Paris's ideas came from the *provençaliste* Paul Meyer (1840–1917). Meyer was not only Gaston Paris's friend, but also his partner in the management of the *Revue critique* and, later, *Romania*. He claimed that Paris's doctoral thesis was one of the most important works of the new scientific activity in France.¹³³ Contrasting Paris's work and Gautier's volumes on the epics, he

¹²⁸ Gautier, *Les épopées françaises*, I, 10–11.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25–31.

¹³¹ Bartsch, "Les épopées françaises, par Léon Gautier," 407.

¹³² Gautier, *Les épopées françaises*, I, 38–42.

¹³³ Meyer, "Recherches sur l'épopée française," 29.

concluded that Paris's book was scientific, whereas Gautier's book merely vulgarised the matter. Nevertheless, Meyer disagreed with Paris on the formation and transmission of the epics, arguing that they were French (as opposed to Paris's theory of double origin) and that they had been transmitted orally from the eighth century in the form that was written down in the twelfth century, as opposed to Paris's theory of the *cantilènes*. Meyer also rejected Paris's idea of the parallel formation of epics and the French language: all the development of the epic and the language had in common was the fact that they happened in the same period.¹³⁴ Likewise, he was emphatic in saying that French epics did not have a German origin and that this theory lacked any basis in fact.

Meyer and Paris's concerns regarding Germanic scholarship on French literature and Romance philology was one of the reasons why they created the periodicals *Revue critique* and *Romania*. In 1858, in an optimistic view on the progress of science in France and Germany, Ebert said:

*La France partage aujourd'hui avec l'Allemagne la réputation d'efforts consacrés à l'avancement général de la science. Ainsi les langues des deux nations qui ont le plus fait pour le progrès intellectuel du genre humain, apparaissent ici pour la première fois fraternellement réunies pour servir d'organe à la science, à la science qui, s'élevant au-dessus de toutes les oppositions nationales, augmente les sympathies des nations.*¹³⁵

Meyer did not share his friend's point of view, claiming instead that there was disparity between the study of languages in France and Germany, and that Germany was ahead even in the study of the French language. German scholars were faithfully studying French literature but their views and the results of their research were not reaching the French, most importantly because there were no French institutions, academies or periodicals dedicated to the French Middle Ages, and also because Germanic studies and the study of the German language in France were in their infancy.¹³⁶ It was for these reasons that Meyer pleaded for the creation of chairs of *provençal* language and literature in the early 1870s:

Le patriotisme et l'amour de la science se réuniraient pour faire réussir une entreprise de ce genre. Une somme de cent mille francs suffirait pour

¹³⁴ Ibid., 37.

¹³⁵ Ebert as cited in Meyer, "Bibliographie," 528.

¹³⁶ Werner and Espagne, "Avant-Propos" to *Philologiques* 3, 7.

*assurer à tout jamais l'existence d'une chaire de provençal, et il ne semble pas qu'il soit impossible de la réunir à Montpellier.*¹³⁷

This lack of academic courses and specialised centres in France was to be remedied in the late 1860s and early 1870s with what Espagne referred to as the “institutionalisation” of medieval studies, the creation of numerous specialist periodicals, societies, academies and schools, most of which counted Gaston Paris as a lecturer, teacher or contributor.¹³⁸ This is one of the instances where we can see that there was a clear sense of patriotism and an investment in national culture in French intellectual life even before the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and that the process of instigation and institutionalisation of medieval studies was already underway in mid-nineteenth-century France.

This late phase of the institutionalisation of medieval studies also involved the creation of several periodicals, such as the *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature* (1866), the *Revue des questions historiques* (1866), the *Revue des Langues Romanes* (1870), *Romania* (1872), and the *Revue historique* (1876), to create a forum in which to discuss works of history, literary criticism, philology and, later, linguistics. The *Revue critique* was founded by the philologist Paul Meyer, the medievalist Gaston Paris, the orientalist Hermann Zotenberg and the historian Charles Morel, with the intention of promoting the scientific criticism of works in the field of humanities. These scholars had great plans for the *Revue*, whose objective was to publish unprejudiced reviews of work on literature, history and philology. In practice, however, the reviewers (mostly Gaston Paris and Paul Meyer) were rather biased. Between 1865 and 1870, one can clearly see that over 60 per cent of the summaries and criticisms of works published in the *Revue critique* were of German books (most of them focusing on negative aspects of the works, rather than on their positive elements). The situation changed after 1871, when there was

¹³⁷ Meyer, “Chronique” (1874), 508. In 1880, Meyer published the epic *Daurel et Beton*, proving, in his view, that there had been *provençal* epics, although very few survived.

¹³⁸ See, for example, Viewig’s article in *Romania* regarding the urgent need for more chairs of regional languages and literature of France after Quinet’s death. In Viewig’s opinion, it was necessary to have more chairs of ancient *provençal* in the Collège de France, and he insisted “surtout sur l’importance d’un enseignement public et purement scientifique de l’ancien provençal” as part of a national literature (Viewig, “Chronique,” 301).

a move towards the publication of French works and perhaps less space for German works and criticisms.¹³⁹

At its inception, in 1866, Paris and Meyer presented the *Revue critique* as innovative, in the sense that it was a periodical designed solely to publish reviews of scholarly books:

*Disons le tout d'abord: nous n'avons pas fondé un nouveau périodique pour nous rendre agréables aux auteurs, ni pour faire des réclames aux libraires. A ceux qui considèrent l'éloge comme la partie essentielle d'un compte-rendu, nous n'avons rien à dire, sinon que la Revue critique n'est pas leur fait. ... Pour nous l'auteur n'existe pas; le livre seul est l'objet de la critique.*¹⁴⁰

Paris and Meyer struggled to find sponsors for their journal. The problem of funding and the need for financial help from the government were a constant source of concern for academics of this period, because with the process of the institutionalisation of medieval studies and professionalisation of its scholars, who now had to be academics, the government started investing less in the enterprises of private institutions.

When Meyer and Paris created *Romania* in 1872, their intention was to publish original research, not just reviews of the work of other scholars. The importance of *Romania* was that it was the first French periodical to deal specifically with matters of the Romance language. As Meyer and Paris said in 1871 when announcing the forthcoming publication of the first issue of *Romania*:

*L'idée de ce recueil n'est pas nouvelle chez nous; nous l'avions conçue depuis longtemps, et sans les funestes événements de l'année qui vient de s'écouler, nous l'aurions déjà mise à exécution. Nous pensons que ces événements, loin de nous en détourner, doivent nous engager à la reprendre avec plus de zèle, à la poursuivre avec plus de persévérance: l'œuvre que nous voulons entreprendre, si elle est avant tout scientifique, est en même temps nationale, et nous avons la ferme conviction que la rupture trop brusque et trop radicale de la France avec son passé, l'ignorance de nos véritables traditions, l'indifférence générale de notre pays pour son histoire intellectuelle et morale, doivent être comptées parmi les causes qui ont amené nos désastres.*¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Ridoux, *Évolution des études médiévales*, 286.

¹⁴⁰ Paris et al., "A nos lecteurs," 2.

¹⁴¹ Paris and Meyer, "Prospectus de la *Romania*," 231.

Criticising both the lack of a French national consciousness and French ignorance and indifference to the past, the two young scholars stated that their periodical, organised and put together within “*la plus pure région de la science impartiale*,”¹⁴² would be a step towards the scientific analysis which had long been commonplace in Germany. They said:

*L'Allemagne possède, pour l'étude de ses antiquités littéraires, un recueil justement estimé, qui porte le nom de Germania; il nous a paru naturel de donner le nom de Romania au recueil où nous voulons faire pour les nations romanes ce que la Germania fait pour les nations germaniques.*¹⁴³

The creation of *Romania* was thus not simply a response to the Franco-Prussian war and the loss of French territories. In fact, the idea for *Romania* was first put forward in 1868, although the periodical only began publication in 1872. Nevertheless, it is true that the war affected every sector of French intellectual life, which responded to the national defeat with bitterness. The disregard of German academics for French texts, publications, lectures and articles also provoked enraged attacks on German academics themselves, on both their specific studies of medieval literature and history and the scientific basis of their work.

To conclude, one must say that the philological and literary disputes in France in the 1860s were not paralleled in Germany. German scholars did not produce many texts on French epics at that time, restricting themselves to analyses of the *Nibelungenlied*, mostly with the use of Wolf and Lachmann's theories. At the time, most French editions of medieval texts were mediocre. Although several debates on the nature of textual editions in France were started in the 1860s, few French scholars paid attention to them until a decade later in France, and until almost two decades later in the rest of Europe.

French Revanchisme and the Epic

*Mon adresse est M. Paul Meyer, 33e régiment de Paris, 38 bataillon, 3e compagnie, armée de Paris.*¹⁴⁴

After 1870, the tone of Gaston Paris's texts changed. When the Prussian army reached Paris and every Frenchman realised that the war

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 232.

¹⁴⁴ Letter of Paul Meyer to Gaston Paris, January 25, 1871. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, n.a.f. 24448, f. 210v.

was lost, Gaston Paris was giving the opening lecture of his course on medieval literature and philology at the Collège de France. Saddened, he called attention to the importance of studying French epics at the moment of greatest crisis: “*Il n’en est rien, messieurs, et l’étude que je vais entreprendre avec vous cette année n’est aucunement dépourvue d’un grand intérêt national et même actuel.*”¹⁴⁵

Apart from the pessimistic tone of his lectures, another change in Paris’s post-1870 work was his increased emphasis on positivism as an instrument capable of turning medieval studies into a true science. A greater interest in positivism was also occurring in Germany, where idealism as a philosophical tendency proved to be of little use for a nation in the process of modernisation. In both nations, the project of “*philologie nationale*,” as Paul Meyer called it, was to become a reality in the field of medieval studies. In theory, the project consisted of the philological and literary analysis of medieval texts as historical examples of nationalism in France and Germany, although it had different applications in each country, and consequently a different duration and significance, as Meyer explained:¹⁴⁶

*Toutefois on peut dès maintenant constater en plusieurs des pays romans un mouvement actif vers ce que nous appellerons la philologie nationale. La science ne peut qu’y gagner: il est en effet dans la connaissance des idiomes un degré qu’un étranger peut difficilement atteindre; et l’étude des dialectes, surtout lorsqu’ils sont dépourvus de littérature, ne peut être entreprise avec quelque succès que par des nationaux.*¹⁴⁷

One of the most virulent French critics of Germanic thinking, Meyer attempted to denigrate German philologists such as Friedrich Diez, one of the founders of national philology in Germany, even before the model was brought to France.¹⁴⁸ According to Meyer, this limitation was a problem because Diez had not considered the unity of Latin versus the variety of the Romance languages, which meant that, in France, the Romance philology adapted from the Germanic one was founded on a false basis.

The project of defining a “national philology” was central to the production of work on philology, literary criticism and history in both France and Germany between 1870 and 1900. Scholars based their analysis on a search for textual origins, including date and geographical

¹⁴⁵ Paris, “La chanson de Roland et la nationalité française,” 89.

¹⁴⁶ See Gumbrecht, “Un souffle d’Allemagne ayant passé,” 24–8.

¹⁴⁷ Meyer, “Rapport sur les progrès de la philologie romane,” 635.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 632.

provenance, and the patriotic motive of their analysis was quite explicit. If French scholars like Gaston Paris had already initiated the project of national philology before 1870, after the Franco-Prussian War it was to become a fever. Gautier's second edition of *Les épopées françaises* illustrates this point. In 1878, Gautier published the second edition of his 1865 work, criticising some of the views that he himself had defended in the first edition. He compared the role of Germanic folk tales, edited by the Brothers Grimm in the 1820s, and the part played by *La chanson de Roland* in France in the early 1870s, assuming in both cases that the nation needed an injection of devotion and patriotism:

*L'Allemagne, avec les Contes des frères Grimm et tant d'autres œuvres profondément patriotiques, avait naguère reconstitué son esprit national 'par le sentiment éclairé de la solidarité de son présent avec son passé': la Chanson de Roland fit la même œuvre durant ces années de recueillement qui suivirent le grand désastre. Les éditions s'en multiplièrent et firent vibrer les âmes qui étaient désolées et muettes.*¹⁴⁹

Certainly, several European editions of *La chanson de Roland*, were published, starting in 1870.¹⁵⁰ In 1872, Gautier published a critical edition of that text.¹⁵¹ This edition was a reply to the work of earlier scholars (such as Génin's 1850 translation, which Gautier regarded as mediocre), especially those who had attempted to prove that the Oxford manuscript of *Roland* was of Norman origin rather than, as Gaston Paris believed, from the Île de France.¹⁵² Gautier's work was also the first attempt at elaborating a true critical edition of the text; by this time in Germany there had been several philological analyses of the *Nibelungenlied*, the national poem, whereas the French had been neglecting their own treasure. The purpose of Gautier's edition of *Roland*, introduced to the readers by a long preface, was clearly the exaltation of France who, even though defeated in the Franco-Prussian War, as Roland was in Roncevaux, would eventually manage to revive herself. As Gautier said in the closing paragraph of the introduction to his 1872 edition of *La chanson de Roland*:

Qu'est-ce après tout que le Roland, si ce n'est le récit d'une grande défaite de la France, d'où la France est glorieusement sortie et qu'elle a

¹⁴⁹ Gautier, *Les épopées françaises*, II, 745.

¹⁵⁰ See Bauquier, *Bibliographie de La chanson de Roland* [1877].

¹⁵¹ His *Roland* was republished seven times between 1872 and 1880.

¹⁵² Gautier, *La chanson de Roland* [1872], xxvi.

*efficacement réparé? La défaite! Nous venons d'y assister. Mais nous saurons bien la réparer un jour par quelque grande et belle victoire.*¹⁵³

Gautier's edition of and comments on *Roland* were influenced by Germanic metaphysical idealism, that is, the belief in a metaphysical link between the creation of that epic and the French people. Gautier, like Paris before him, defended the view that *La chanson de Roland* was not a product of any individual poet, but rather the entire nation. He also emphasised the identity of Roland as a deeply religious hero, and the union of Church and state in the formation of the French nation. Although in his first edition of *Les épopées françaises*, Gautier had claimed that French epics were of Germanic origin, he now refused to surrender authorship of *Roland* to the Germans, considering it French: "*la plus antique, la plus célèbre, la plus belle de toutes les Chansons de geste.*"¹⁵⁴ *La chanson de Roland* was, in his opinion, a French text beyond any doubt, because Charlemagne was a French historical figure, and his nephew Roland was a French character as well.¹⁵⁵ Understandably, the matter of whether the French epic was or was not a truly French genre became more and more sensitive during the 1870s and 80s. The origin of French epics and the issue of whether Roland was a Christian hero or not became the central issues for European scholars tackling the problems of *La chanson de Roland* as a fictional/historical text in that period.

In his work dedicated to the origins of French epics, published in 1884, Florentine scholar Pio Rajna offered criticism of Paris's theories about the dual origins of the epic, bringing back the "purely Germanic origin" theory.¹⁵⁶ He rejected Paris's theory of the *cantilènes* for two reasons. First, he argued that it presumed that French epics had been created twice, in both the eighth and twelfth centuries. Second, he did not accept that French epics were of Frankish origin, this being the basis of Paris's theory of the *cantilènes*, which assumed a transition from Merovingian epics to Capetian *chansons de geste*.¹⁵⁷ Paris described his own theory as that of the caterpillar and butterfly, epics being created in a crude state and evolving to a more sophisticated form later.¹⁵⁸ Rajna, by contrast, claimed

¹⁵³ Ibid., lv.

¹⁵⁴ Gautier, *La chanson de Roland: Texte critique* [1880], viii.

¹⁵⁵ Only in poetic versions of the story of Roland is there suggestion that he was Charlemagne's nephew.

¹⁵⁶ For further developments of Rajna's ideas, see Gasparini, "Le rôle de la tradition dans la circulation de la littérature médiévale," 131–60.

¹⁵⁷ See Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, 12–15.

¹⁵⁸ Paris, "Le origine dell'epopea francese," 616–17.

that medieval epics did not go through such a transition, but were created fully formed in the seventh century, and that they were of Germanic origin. To Rajna's ideas, Paris posited his own new theory, one criticising his previous assumptions. In his new theory, Paris claimed that the French epics did not have a Germanic origin, being a French product.

In France, studies on the epic genre multiplied, but they mostly took the form of articles examining specific elements of the epic, such as the origin, date and place of composition. We can see the urgency of this task in the fact that French scholars produced very few books on French epics in the years 1870–1900. Instead, most scholars restricted themselves to articles, a symptom of the desperate need for a variety of publications on French epics, as opposed to longer and perhaps more elaborate works. Therefore, scholars wrote short articles on medieval studies with furious speed, even if they often repeated themselves and did not really say anything original.

One of the most interesting criticisms directed against German literature by French scholars was based on the supposedly organic nature of French culture versus the individualistic character of German society. Attempting to prove the inability of German people to have produced the French epics, French authors emphasised the organic nature of the development of France (a true nation) versus a perceived Germanic individualism. For them, Germany was not yet a nation (despite the fact that it had now political unity), and would not be a nation so long as it incorporated within itself parts of the French territory. They analysed French and German epics in the comparative manner, which, at the time, was seen to be scientific, showing parallels in the development of the French and the German epic. This approach, although popular, did not bring much improvement to literary studies, since late nineteenth-century scholars used comparative analysis not to show positive aspects in the differences between the developments of the epic in Germany and France, but to diminish the importance of one nation's culture and increase the significance of the other. As Brunetière said, in his discourse for the *Funérailles de Gaston Paris* in 1903:

*Gaston Paris avait compris qu'on ne sait rien d'une langue ni d'une littérature si l'on ne les connaît que dans leur isolement. La connaissance de l'épopée française du moyen âge ne saurait se séparer de la connaissance de l'épopée germanique.*¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Brunetière, "Funérailles de M. Gaston Paris," 84.

Using comparative analysis, French scholars attempted to prove that, unlike French epics, German epics were clearly not about the people, but rather about individual heroes, such as Sigfried.

In this sense, the nature of French education, still based on the principle of *la culture générale*, of what Prochasson called “*complexe Pic de la Mirandole*,”¹⁶⁰ contrasted with the pragmatic Germanic *Bildung* and emphasis on individual self-improvement.¹⁶¹ For scholars in late nineteenth-century France, there was a clear link between highlighting national values (characteristic of the epic literature), and the natural characteristics of the French people. As we have seen in Gaston Paris’s ideas, French epics were regarded as representative of the organic mentality of the French and proof of France’s enduring and superior qualities. Furthermore, in an attempt to restore some French pride, French academics even denied that Germany was a strong nation, despite its weaponry and power, and emphasised the Germans’ utter lack of human values.¹⁶² For the French, the late formation of the nation and the delayed feeling of nationality were among Germany’s most significant weaknesses. Add to this the fact that since 1871 Germany had two French provinces in her territory, provinces which were bound to rebel, and one could see how deeply troubling was the position of Germany.

Despite their supposedly objective analyses, French scholars of this period were, in effect, attempting to convince themselves that the effects of the war would pass, and that France could be united and great once more. More than ever before, they used medieval studies to make contrasts between France and Germany. However, they no longer used medieval studies just in terms of the literary merit of the texts being studied, as it had been the case with early comparisons of *Huon* and *Ornit*, or *Roland* and the *Nibelungenlied*. What was now being highlighted was that France, unlike Germany, possessed the correct methodology for dealing with medieval texts (based on philology and textual criticism), the knowledge to comprehend medieval meanings and lessons for the future, and also, although less obviously, the sensitivity to deal with those particular texts.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Prochasson, in *Les années électriques (1880–1910)*, 14, was referring to the Renaissance ideal of consolidation of knowledge and the universal man.

¹⁶¹ Ringer, *Fields of knowledge*, 146. See also Coulanges, “L’enseignement supérieur en Allemagne d’après des rapports récents,” 813–33.

¹⁶² Renan, “Preface” to *La réforme intellectuelle et morale*, 3.

¹⁶³ Paris, “Romani, Romania, lingua romana, romancium,” 20–1; Renan, “La guerre entre la France et l’Allemagne.” See also Arnavielle, “Sur quelques idées-force de Gaston Paris,” 3–16.

In the late nineteenth century, medieval studies in France broadened their scope to include new paths of research, such as a new emphasis on science and a renewed interest in the work of earlier generations of scholars and their approaches to medieval texts. Medieval studies were no longer principally concerned with cataloguing manuscripts and the philological analysis of texts. They were now seen as a discipline at the heart of all the human sciences, a privileged laboratory where one could see the developments in French scholarship, from what was considered the extravagant romanticism of the 1850s to the scientific precision of the 1880s and 90s. The difference between being scientific and being perceived as scientific cannot be overemphasised; scholars of the 1830s, 40s and 50s had already viewed their studies as scientific rather than as subjective and romantic. Similarly, in the period 1870–90, scholars did not think that their own approach was subjective; they believed themselves to be scientific. Yet, as had been the case before 1870, their approach was subjective, and if subjective meant romantic (and it did for late nineteenth-century philologists), then one has no choice but to call them romantic as well, which is what scholars have done ever since when characterising the work of this generation of medievalists. It is more profitable, however, to underline the fact this taxonomy can only be used in a relative perspective. For scholars in the 1870s, their predecessors were romantic; to us, scholars in the 1870s seem rather romantic. In the end, neither group would have accepted the accuracy of this label.

Besides viewing themselves as scientific, medieval studies in the last three decades of the nineteenth century were no longer based purely on directly comparative analysis. In order to describe the characteristics and developments of the epic genre in France, scholars began to use explanatory systems that could be applied not only to the French epic, but also to any epic in any period of history (such as the theory of the *cantilènes*, and the theory of the collective authorship of epics). Yet, ironically, scholars ended up by failing to be able to apply their analyses to any specific case study. These new systems were better suited to theoretical disputes between France and Germany, in which each questioned the other's historical knowledge, accuracy of reading and understanding of the language. However, they came to be used everywhere and for every subject, as we shall see in the next chapter in the analysis of the *fabliaux*. As I will show below, what Bédier in 1893 called “positivistic systems” ended up being dismissed in the early twentieth century as highly ineffective for both historical and literary analysis.

Partly due to this intellectual rivalry between France and Germany, first editions of French epics proliferated in the years 1870–90, and helped

to enhance French pride.¹⁶⁴ With the support of the Société des anciens textes français, Gaston Raynaud and Jacques Normand published the epic *Aiol* in 1877. Two years later, also under the auspices of the Société, Gaston Raynaud published *Élie de Saint Gille*, a work which complemented *Aiol*. Again, Paris claimed that the epic was “*la partie la plus ancienne, la plus originale et la plus intéressante de cette poésie*.”¹⁶⁵ Although, in his opinion, all forms of medieval literature should be of interest to the general public, he believed that there should be particular investment in the study of national epics because they were, after all, the supreme manifestation of French national consciousness.

Despite the plethora of publications, articles, lectures and book reviews in the years 1870–80, when French pride was still suffering from the defeat at Sedan, the use of German authors as a starting point for the study of French epics put French scholars in the difficult position of basing their own knowledge upon the enemy’s erudition. This was to become an even more serious problem in the late 1880s and early 1890s, as French scholars started thinking that it was about time they had learned from the enemy all they were ever going to learn. This problem led French scholars to turn away from the criticism of their own works and to start criticising German scholars of established reputation such as Wolf and Lachmann. In order to challenge the superiority of Germanic scholarship, negative criticism of German authors in periodicals increased in number and became more acrimonious after 1880. Bitterness was directed both against the French people’s lack of interest in their own past,¹⁶⁶ and towards Germany and its academics. As mentioned above, Gaston Paris had managed to justify to himself and to his colleagues the use of Germanic methods and theories in epic studies. Fustel de Coulanges, on the other hand, was one of the most outspoken enemies of Germanic scholarship. Yet even he could not deny the lack of professionalism of French historians, always humbly referring to German academics as great intellectuals, regardless of their quality:

Que n’a-t-on pas dit depuis lors sur la race germanique! Nos historiens n’avaient que mépris pour la population gauloise, que sympathie pour les

¹⁶⁴ Paris, “Publications de la Société des anciens textes français (1872–1886),” 395–8.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 396.

¹⁶⁶ See Paul Meyer and Gaston Paris’s editorial on the publication of their periodical, *Romania*, in which they blame themselves and the French in general for not preserving their own national past (Paris and Meyer, “Prospectus de la *Romania*,” 231).

*Germaines. La Gaule était la corruption et la lâcheté; la Germanie était la vertu, la chasteté, le désintéressement, la force, la liberté.*¹⁶⁷

He went further still, accusing Frenchmen of being happy with their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, because it confirmed the superiority of the German race and its ability to conquer and rule France. Criticising the lack of patriotism in France, Coulanges said:

*Les Allemands ont tous le culte de la patrie, et ils entendent le mot patrie dans son sens vrai: c'est le Vaterland, la terra patrum, la terre des ancêtres, c'est le pays tel que les ancêtres l'ont eu et l'ont fait. Ils aiment ce passé, surtout ils le respectent. Ils n'en parlent que comme on parle d'une chose sainte.*¹⁶⁸

For him, the idea, so well diffused in France, that “*science n'a pas de patrie*” was a foolish distortion of the saying's original meaning, because in Germany, where the modern concept of science had been created at the beginning of the century, scientific activity had always been motivated by patriotism. Enhancing national pride was the aim of scientists and in Germany only patriotic men could become scientists. Coulanges showed his exasperation with the fact that in France the highest form of science was “*pure et désintéressé*,” which, in his opinion, was a great error, and a mistake that had cost France part of its territory.¹⁶⁹ Coulanges, *militant érudit*, finished his article by preaching intellectual war against Germany. Even if the French army, as it stood, could not defeat the enemy, the proper reform of education so as to promote science and patriotism would allow France to fight (and win) an academic war against the Germans.

Coulanges's response to the Germanic occupation of Alsace and Lorraine was not an isolated one. Ernest Renan, as we have seen above, also directed criticism against both the Germans and their views on science.¹⁷⁰ Other scholars launched an assault on particular aspects of Germanic scholarship. Michel Bréal and Andrew Lang, for example, wrote important criticisms of Wolf in the early 1900s. They attempted to re-evaluate the root of the problem with the theories of epics (such as Wolf's theory on Homer), not without success, and although they did not prove

¹⁶⁷ Coulanges, “De la manière d'écrire l'histoire en France et en Allemagne,” 241–2.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁷⁰ Renan, “La réforme intellectuelle et morale de la France,” 38–40.

Wolf wrong, they reduced his influence on the analysis of medieval epics.¹⁷¹

Paris too was part of this movement against German ideas. As a result, he was obliged to do what all scholars fear and become a critic of his own earlier work. In 1882, he reassessed his own ideas on the *Volk-Epos*, saying that his claim that epics had no individual authors was contrary to common sense, as all works must have an author. He thus rejected the mystical basis of the national epic, although he continued to affirm the national style of the epics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹⁷² Paris was also one of the first scholars to address the delicate matter of Wolf and Lachmann's ideas, which had provided the basis for the entire corpus of European epic criticism and analysis since 1800. In 1884, analysing his own earlier work, Paris denied that his theories on the *cantilènes* derived from Wolf.¹⁷³ In the mid-1880s, he began a criticism of the theory of the Germanic origin of the French epics, defending the "deeply intimate character of the French epics":

*Notre épopée est allemande d'origine, elle est latine de langue; mais ces mots n'ont, pour l'époque où elle est vraiment florissante, qu'un sens scientifique; elle est profondément, intimement française; elle est la première voix que l'âme française, prenant conscience d'elle-même, ait fait entendre dans le monde, et, comme il est-arrivé souvent depuis, cette voix a éveillé des échos tout alentour.*¹⁷⁴

In 1901, two years before his death, Paris reviewed his theories once again, this time affirming the French origin of French epics against any residual Germanism: "*Mais l'épopée allemande et la française, si elles présentent certains traits communs, sont en général parfaitement indépendantes et comme esprit et comme forme.*"¹⁷⁵ Going against what he himself had stood for during the previous 35 years, Paris surrendered, in Bédier's view, to "simple common sense," realising what had been obvious all along: the French origin of the French epics and the Germanic origin of the German epics.¹⁷⁶ Perhaps because of his attempt to proceed to scientific-positivistic analysis without succeeding in an unbiased point of departure for his research, much of Gaston Paris's work was indeed based

¹⁷¹ Lang, *Homer and the epic* and *Homer and his age*; Bréal, *Pour mieux connaître Homère*.

¹⁷² Paris, "Le Carmen de Prodicione Guenonis et la légende de Roncevaux," 518.

¹⁷³ Paris, "Le origine dell'epopea francese," 617.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 627.

¹⁷⁵ Paris, "Histoire de la littérature française au moyen âge," 28.

¹⁷⁶ Bédier, *Les légendes épiques*, III, 453–4.

on the analysis of elements whose result was frequently too arbitrary to be proven right or wrong.¹⁷⁷ This may be partly because Paris was primarily concerned with using medieval literature to prove the theory rather than with testing the theory against the evidence of medieval texts to see whether the argument really worked. Paris's theories made sense to him because, ultimately, his concern was not with medieval literature and history, but with the history of France and the means to make the French accept the war as a mere moment in history, one that did not represent the true excellence of France. For Paris, the moment of agony would pass, whereas the greatness of France and its people was eternal, and could be found 1,000 years back in the depths of the Dark Ages. He was therefore using literature and history for a political purpose, rather than for science as an end in and of itself. Paris himself thought that science should be an end in itself, but despite his claims he did not, and could not, practise history or literary criticism in this way. During the 1880s and 90s, many French authors, Paris included, started to suppress references to German authors in their texts. Although they had quoted from them before, they now cited them only to reject them. Again, this was itself a non-scientific attitude, one of pure *revanchisme*, and therefore contrary to the very credibility that French academics were supposedly trying to create.

In conclusion, in the period 1880–90, there was a clear impetus towards legitimising medieval studies and a greater emphasis on scientific methods in Parisian academia, a drive promoted by the rivalry between France and Germany. One of the by-products of this emphasis on science was an increasing specialisation of scholars in the two decades following the Franco-Prussian War.¹⁷⁸ Thus authors such as Meyer and Coulanges narrowed their fields of interest in the 1870s and 80s, whereas in the 1860s they had written about anything and everything. However, despite the need for specialisation and compartmentalisation of knowledge, academics remained divided into Catholics versus sceptics, medievalists versus classicists, *provençalistes* versus scholars of the *langue d'oc*, making scholars like Gaston Paris concerned that the division of ideas would reflect the division of the nation.¹⁷⁹

The progressive professionalisation of historians and literary critics coincided with the emergence of a new generation of intellectuals, one for whom the Franco-Prussian War was a thing of the past. This new

¹⁷⁷ An example is, as we shall see, Paris's interpretation of the *fabliaux* as having an Indian origin; another example is his theory on the Celtic origin of *Tristan et Iseut*, as we will see on Chapter Four.

¹⁷⁸ Gilbert, "The professionalization of history in the nineteenth century," 320.

¹⁷⁹ Ringer, *Fields of knowledge*, 215–18.

generation was not much concerned with the intellectual war of the previous generation, but with French academia as they found it in their own day. If a stereotype had been created in the academia of the 1860s and 70s about the work of previous generations of scholars, the 1890s brought a new stereotype. The new scholars did not take kindly to the work of Meyer and Paris, in that they viewed the work of scholars in the 1870s as politically, religiously and personally biased. I next turn to the work of some of this new generation of scholars in order to analyse the repercussions of their theories on medieval epics for both the history of philology and medievalism.

Early Revisionism and the Debate on the Medieval Epic

*Je n'ai pas cherché à construire la vérité historique comme un poème.*¹⁸⁰

*Je ne rendrai notre Chanson de Roland aux Germains que lorsque les Allemands auront d'abord rendu aux Scythes leurs Nibelungen.*¹⁸¹

Bédier and the Critique of Theories on the Medieval Epic

One of the concerns of scientific-positivistic scholars in the late 1880s and 90s, the period when medieval studies were becoming more and more specialised, was the quest for truth. If, in the 1870s, scholars had emphasised the need for truth, as Paris constantly did, they did not always put truth before the production of an interpretation of medieval literature and history that was flattering to France and the French people. It was only in the 1890s that scholars actually started practising what they preached, forgetting nationalism and simply working on literary and historical research. That said, they soon discovered that in spite of their search for truth, truth in fact was harder to find than they themselves had imagined.

In the late 1880s, academics in the Parisian set began to criticise the very foundations on which earlier scholars had based French knowledge. Several scholars can be cited, but here I will concentrate on Joseph Bédier and Ferdinand Brunetière as representing two types of criticism which differed markedly from that of the previous generation of intellectuals in its approach to history and literary studies. First, the two generations differed because the generation of Gaston Paris and Meyer had started doing research almost from scratch, and therefore had to put great effort into researching, documenting and cataloguing manuscripts, whereas the

¹⁸⁰ Bédier, *Les légendes épiques*, I, vii.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, III, 453.

next generation had something solid from which to start. Second, while Gaston Paris's generation saw scientific-positivism in the academic milieu as the only possible way of fighting an intellectual war against Germany, Bédier's generation was not much concerned with the matter of which type of study was more scientific. Third, with the rise of scientific-positivism as the privileged methodological and philosophical doctrine, scholars in the years 1860–70 had created positivistic systems which apparently could explain medieval literature (and indeed any type of literature) according to definite paradigms. These paradigms were most heavily criticised by the generation that started their academic careers in the 1880s.

Joseph Bédier was Gaston Paris's most promising disciple. Although in 1893 he had written his doctoral thesis on the *fabliaux* and dismissed Paris's theories on that subject,¹⁸² he was always Paris's close friend and intellectual heir. His criticisms of his mentor's theories were, for some, a delicate issue¹⁸³ but it did not seem to be a problem for Paris and Bédier themselves outside the workplace. Paris responded to Bédier's criticisms, and, ultimately, each scholar was free to pursue his own beliefs. Bédier's critique of Paris's theories on the *fabliaux* represented his first effort to criticise a positivistic system of interpretation of medieval literature. His work on the French epic was much more impressive. Published in four volumes between 1908 and 1913, starting five years after Paris's death, *Les légendes épiques* provided an analyses and criticism of every existing theory about the French epic, and offered an alternative approach of Bédier's own creation.

Following the path he had paved when studying the *fabliaux*, Bédier started his work by criticising the search for textual origins that had dictated all previous study of the epic. In the first of his four volumes, Bédier affirmed that his main concern was to discredit Gaston Paris's theory of *cantilènes*, which Bédier called the "*theorie de l'origine ancienne*." For him, this theory was badly developed, in the sense that it did not stand up to close examination and had to dismiss many case studies as exceptions because they did not fit the theory. For Bédier, the theory itself was unacceptable, because it offended common sense, as he made clear:¹⁸⁴

Je suis donc tenu, ici comme ailleurs, de discuter l'hypothèse de l'origine ancienne des chansons de geste. Comme elle consiste à affirmer l'existence

¹⁸² See Chapter Three below.

¹⁸³ Rajna, "Una rivoluzione negli studi intorno alle 'Chansons de geste'," 331–91.

¹⁸⁴ Bédier, *Les légendes épiques*, I, 271–5. See below.

*de très anciens modèles, d'ailleurs perdus, de nos romans, on ne peut rien lui opposer dans l'ordre des faits, mais seulement dans l'ordre des vraisemblances. On n'a d'autre recours contre elle que le mode de démonstration que les traités de logique appellent la réduction à l'impossible.*¹⁸⁵

For Bédier, contrary to traditional theories, all medieval epic poems had been written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Bédier was certain that there must have been a particular reason why they were written at this specific time, and it was this that he proposed to discover.¹⁸⁶ In his critique of earlier theories on medieval epics, Bédier identified several major claims made in Gaston Paris's interpretation of French *chansons de geste*: that twelfth- and thirteenth-century poems had actually been created centuries before; that epics were spontaneous popular creations; and that contemporaries of the events in question had actually sung the legends involving Charlemagne and his soldiers. He then stated that these theories began from premises that were overly comprehensive, as they were allegedly capable of explaining all forms of epics and popular literature ever produced.¹⁸⁷ He did not see legends as necessarily created by eyewitnesses to the events they recounted. For him, it was clear that not only had the poet not been present, but also that he had not been part of a group, and was simply a single individual. The epic as a popular creation, whose author, a community of people, had witnessed the events narrated was, in Bédier's view, a myth created by nineteenth-century scholars themselves.

Contrary to Paris's theories, which he saw as based on a priori reasoning, Bédier affirmed that in his study, "*je m'étais borné à observer, patiemment et modestement, des faits.*"¹⁸⁸ Studying the cycle of Guillaume d'Orange, he noted his surprise at the large number of anomalies that it contained when interpreted according to his fellow scholars' theories. For Bédier, writing in what Pio Rajna later considered abusive terms, the truth was that:

Quand ces 'exceptions' se furent multipliées et quand, faisant nombre et masse, elles semblèrent, par leur nombre et leur masse, tendre à me suggérer une thèse d'ensemble sur la formation des chansons de geste, quand je sentis que ces remarques, d'abord isolées, menaçaient de prendre

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., III, 10.

¹⁸⁶ See Bédier, *Les légendes épiques*, especially volumes III and IV.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., I, iv.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., vi.

*les allures d'un système, je m'en alarmai comme d'un péril et surtout comme d'un ridicule.*¹⁸⁹

For Bédier, the existence of so many exceptions was a confirmation that a system or rule was wrong. This system had, therefore, either to be changed in order to incorporate all elements without exception, or to be replaced by a system which did not attempt to analyse all medieval epics, but which was specific to one or another cycle (or to poems of a certain century). In his view, one could elaborate a theory, but it should be a comprehensive theory, which did not have any exceptions: “*La théorie générale que je propose ne sera que la somme de vérités particulières, acquises chacune dans son ordre par des recherches indépendantes entre elles et dont seuls les résultats sont solidaires.*”¹⁹⁰

As in his work on the *fabliaux*,¹⁹¹ Bédier's formulations about the epic were audacious and contentious: “*Conscient et inquiet de mon audace, mais passant outre, je proposerai dans cet ouvrage, en regard des diverses théories publiées jusqu'ici sur les origines de l'épopée française, une théorie nouvelle.*”¹⁹² His own new theory, which he formally announced at the end of volume four, rejected all the elements of Paris's theories, and all the debates in which other scholars had involved themselves during the previous 40 years. Pio Rajna, in an enraged response to Bédier's text, suggested that he had not only been disrespectful to all scholars before him, but above all to Gaston Paris, who was dead and could not defend himself.¹⁹³ Bédier was, indeed, very opinionated, and he did not measure his words when it came to expressing what he believed in and criticising what he thought to be wrong. In his words, when talking about the range of theories which he wanted to dismiss as both impossible and irrational:

*Nous sommes en un mot tenus de constater et de croire que, durant la période où les textes nous manquent et seulement durant cette période, les 'lois qui gouvernent la Légende' sont justement les lois qui gouvernent nos esprits quand la raison, dans nos rêves par exemple, cesse de les régir.*¹⁹⁴

Furthermore, after criticising his master once again for embellishing the study of literature and historical myths and legends, Bédier argued that his

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., viii–ix.

¹⁹¹ See Chapter Three below.

¹⁹² Bédier, *Les légendes épiques*, I, vii.

¹⁹³ Rajna, “Una rivoluzione negli studi intorno alle ‘Chansons de geste’,” 351.

¹⁹⁴ Bédier, *Les légendes épiques*, III, 25.

main purpose was not, as Paris unconsciously had done, to see history as a précis of good actions written in poetic style:

*Puisque je n'ai pas cherché à construire la vérité historique comme un poème, puisque ces vues ne sont pas formées autour d'une hypothèse préconçue, mais à ma surprise, à mon corps défendant, lentement, par l'examen successif de légendes isolées, c'est dans l'ordre même et sous la forme même où elles se sont composées dans mon esprit qu'on les trouvera en ces volumes.*¹⁹⁵

This resonant argument was a clear criticism of the works of Gaston Paris and his generation, ironically one which seems to echo the criticism which Gaston Paris himself had directed against his father's work. It was also the definition of a clear and concise methodology, one which began from the premise that poetry and historical truth are incompatible. Furthermore, for Bédier, the writing of history must be free from the elements which could make it into a poem, such as long descriptions, elaborate language and a narrative character when presenting historical facts and evidence. And yet, as Bédier pointed out, presenting the history of France as a poem was precisely what Gaston Paris's generation had done in their historical analyses.

The poetic rewriting of historical facts was, as we have seen, the whole basis of the interpretative analysis of French epics by Paris's generation. In the 1900s, scholars came to see this as a dated form of analysis. After Bédier, poetry and history became divorced. The key point is that in building a history of medieval France, the scholars who began their career in the 1860s were building the poetics of the French past. They had created the legend of the Middle Ages as a golden period of French history and the idea that medieval epics were the best literary genre ever written because they needed new legends to build a feeling of nationalism among French people. The Franco-Prussian War did not cause this desire to create a national sentiment, but this desire did become more pronounced after it. By the time Bédier was writing, however, the situation had changed, and the association between patriotism, literature and national history no longer existed as an immediate motivating factor for medieval/literary studies.

For Bédier, the problem of the creation of the epic was at the centre of all literary criticism. He used medieval works on Guillaume d'Orange as an example of epic cycle in his first volume, although he believed that the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., I, vii–viii.

problem of formation also existed in other cycles, *gestes* and poems.¹⁹⁶ Furthermore, the problem of formation raised questions common to any literary genre, such as what is fictional and what is historical, and what do particular poems possess that allow scholars to speculate about earlier versions.¹⁹⁷ For Bédier, epics were not, as they were for Brunetière, a way of writing history.¹⁹⁸ “*Certes*,” Bédier said, “*la légende peut, doit broder sur l’histoire, et c’est par là précisément qu’elle n’est pas histoire*.”¹⁹⁹ Being “close to being history” was not good enough because, for Bédier, true history should not be mixed up with poetics, legends or anything that was not based on actual events. Although Bédier believed that facts, as a historian would define them, did not exist, because historians could only deal with succeeding interpretations of facts, he was also clear when he said that he believed that history had existed. He just did not think one could objectively deal with its components (facts) without being subjective in their treatment. The same applied to literary analysis, but in this case, he was even more emphatic in affirming that there was no truth, as literary works are not factual sketches (as Paris thought that the epic genre, for example, was). For Bédier, this was in no way diminishing to historians or literary critics carrying out a historical analysis; it was just part of the job to live with the fact that the sources only give interpretations and possibilities of facts.

When writing about *La chanson de Roland*, in the third volume of *Les légendes épiques*, Bédier felt the need to explain that all previous French analyses of the poem had been influenced by the ideas of German romantics at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In his opinion, these German theories and the understanding of epics that they generated corresponded to sentiments particular to that period of German history, that is, the desire to rebuild their nation:

La fière originalité des créations du génie allemand aux âges anciens, la grandeur de l’ancienne épopée allemande semblaient les gages de cet espoir: l’âme allemande se referait d’elle-même, spontanément. Et c’est de là ... de cette mystique patriotique, que naquirent, en la période du Strurm und Drang, puis au temps des romantiques, la philologie allemande, la science allemande, et particulièrement les systèmes du XIXe siècle sur

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 10–12.

¹⁹⁸ Brunetière, “L’érudition contemporaine et la littérature française du moyen âge,” I, 51.

¹⁹⁹ Bédier, *Les légendes épiques*, III, 18.

*l'origine du langage, sur la formation des mythes, et sur la formation des épopées nationales.*²⁰⁰

For Bédier, all such theories on the ancient origin of epics and the idea of popular origin which they involved were now dated, since they corresponded to a particular time in the history of philology, being theories of philologists, or a “philosophy of literature.” As he claimed, “*oui, dans l'esprit de Jacob Grimm, ces idées avaient été belles, organiques, harmonieuses. Mais, vers 1884, les temps étaient changés.*”²⁰¹ Bédier attacked Paris and Meyer for not having realised that what they were doing was uncritically following Germanic ideas, ideas of authors who were not even philologists, but grammarians, such as Grimm, who had not studied French epics and who therefore could not comment accurately on them:

*C'est eux pourtant [Grimm and Herder], comme on vient de le voir, qui ont construit tout le système; mais ce qui apparaît non moins clairement, c'est que ce système, construit par des hommes qui avaient tout ignoré, ou presque, des chansons de geste, il était fatal qu'un jour, au premier jour, l'esprit du temps l'appliquât aux chansons de geste, automatiquement.*²⁰²

The acceptance of such ideas in Bédier's viewpoint was a matter of faith among academics, rather than reason.²⁰³ This was because he believed that, in practice, earlier philologists were attempting to unveil secrets of a mystical nature rather than, as they themselves claimed, carrying out scientifically oriented analyses. Bédier's main point cannot be overemphasised: he claimed that it was impossible to produce objective science as Gaston Paris's generation had aimed to produce. He was adamant that, especially in human sciences, subjective feelings would always affect scientists because scientists are human, and humans are susceptible to emotions. The point here is that although Bédier's analysis was specifically a reaction to that of Gaston Paris's generation, his perception of how history is lived versus how it is studied is still influential today.

Following Bédier's criticism of Paris, Bédier also claimed that *La chanson de Roland* was a purely French poem, rather than a Germanic poem or a half-and-half poem. For him, *Roland* was a poem written by a “*Franc de France*,” and since the seventh century, that expression had not

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 215–16.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 271.

²⁰² Ibid., 225 (emphasis added).

²⁰³ Ibid., 217.

been applied to anyone but the French.²⁰⁴ Bédier believed that any analysis based on a non-French origin of French epics was wrong, as he asserted that any interpretation that claimed that German epics were Scyth in origin (Görres' theory) was wrong. In an often quoted sentence, Bédier said: "*je ne rendrai notre Chanson de Roland aux Germains que lorsque les Allemands auront d'abord rendu aux Scythes leurs Nibelungen.*"²⁰⁵

Bédier also criticised the concept of a collective authorship of *La chanson de Roland* and other epics, and stated that an epic poem's author did matter (thus rejecting Renan's claim that it did not). Yet, when Bédier himself came to edit *La chanson de Roland*, he did not publish it using the author's name.²⁰⁶ Although that poem had an author, Théroulde, who named himself in the last verse, the public never really accepted the idea that *Roland* had not been written by the collective nation. Even now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, *Roland* and all other epics are "poems without a poet." Mid-nineteenth-century interpretations and analyses of medieval literature were seen as dated by Bédier and are still seen as such today; but their influence remains even after the theories themselves have long been abandoned. For the French, and, due to their influence, other nations as well, *La chanson de Roland* can never be seen as product of an author; it is too much of a national symbol to have its authorship restricted to one individual. Some ideas are stronger than reason and last longer than they should, because they grow and reproduce in the fertile space of people's sentiments and imagination.

Brunetière and the Critique of French Medievalism²⁰⁷

One of the innovations of scholars in the period 1880–90 was the introduction of an appeal to common sense against abstract scholarly logic as an instrument of critique. For Ferdinand Brunetière (1849–1906), mid- and late nineteenth-century French medievalism was in an impoverished state. Mixing patriotism with academic life had been a mistake, one that

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 451–2.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 453.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 387 and 449–50.

²⁰⁷ The foundation of medieval studies in France in the 1870s was "*critique*." This French word has two English senses, both "assessment" and "condemnation." Because the word "*critique*" is hard to translate into English, I retain the French term, meaning, as in the late nineteenth century, the analytical evaluation of works of art and literary texts, based on a supposedly universal normative principle that allowed one to judge the value of an artwork or text. See Belis, *La critique française à la fin du XIXe siècle*.

had generated the worst theories ever produced in French intellectual history: “*A-t-on craint de notre temps que, sous cette forme, non pas certes acceptable, mais discutable au moins, il ne choquât pas assez vivement l’opinion commune et le simple bon sens?*”²⁰⁸

Brunetière was not a medievalist, but a classicist, and his opinions on the institutionalisation of medievalism were guided by his animosity towards those who saw the Middle Ages as a privileged moment in French literary history with no consideration for what was good literature. Like Bédier, Brunetière refuted complicated positivistic systems that were meant to codify all knowledge within one theoretical scheme. In showing that they did not work, both authors used forms of textual analysis unknown to scholars of Paris’s generation. For example, Bédier and Brunetière both examined the aesthetic aspect of the text, and how it appealed to modern taste, to show that there is a difference, one that the previous generation of literary critics had not considered, between good and bad literature and what is aesthetically pleasing and that which is not. In an article about the role of the Société des anciens textes français, Bédier had argued that it was indeed a problem to decide what should and should not be edited, that is, what deserves to be seen as a monument of the nation’s literature. In his words: “*Les uns et les autres ont tort. Il ne faut pas dire: Cela est absurde, cela est magnifique; il faut dire: Cela est de l’esprit humain, donc cela a son prix.*”²⁰⁹ Going further, he claimed that “*les formes rudimentaires ou dégénérées de l’humanité peuvent être significatives à l’égal des plus harmonieusement belles.*”²¹⁰ Not himself an adept of the idea that one should only publish beautiful texts, Bédier questioned the position of the Société for prioritising aesthetically beautiful texts over others, perhaps believing that this was partially due to competition with Germany because of “*le regret de voir nos antiquités nationales restaurées par des étrangers, par des Allemands surtout?*”²¹¹ For Brunetière, on the other hand, who advocated publishing texts that were actually classics of French literature over those that were not, the danger was in scholars’ use of texts that appealed to their subjective taste in order to construct systems of historical, philological and literary analysis, which were supposedly objective:

²⁰⁸ Brunetière, “L’érudition contemporaine et la littérature française du moyen âge,” 5.

²⁰⁹ Bédier, “La Société des anciens textes français,” 909.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 908.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 907.

*Le malheur est qu'on ne commette impunément aucun erreur de goût: les erreurs de goût mènent aux erreurs de jugement, les erreurs de jugement aux erreurs de doctrine; et c'est ici le cas. On ne se contente pas d'admirer silencieusement ces vieux textes, à part soi, dans le secret de la bibliothèque; on crie son enthousiasme à tous les échos qu'on rencontre.*²¹²

Indeed, it was at this time that the problem of taste that still divides the opinions of literary critics today was created. Should scholars use any text of any historical period for historical and literary analysis, or should their analysis be restricted to texts which are now seen as works of genius and as classics of literature?²¹³ For Brunetière, the issue of scholars' love for the Middle Ages was even more complicated than just a matter of taste. As a classicist, his interest in medieval studies was less in the practical aspect of his research than in the historiographical aspect of medieval literary criticism. Furthermore, he believed that, as a result of national rivalry with Germany, the previous generation had been blinded to the real value of historical, literary and philological analysis. In his opinion, this national rivalry would end up ruining French academia for good:

*Nous avons changé tout cela, sous prétexte d'antiquités nationales. Et voici que, de l'ombre des bibliothèques et du fond de l'École des chartes, un souffle d'Allemagne ayant passé, toute une jeune génération d'érudits s'est levée, patiente ou même dure au travail - c'est une justice qu'on doit lui rendre - âpre aux querelles, intolérante aux contradictions, et à qui cet enthousiasme jusqu'alors tempéré de la langue et de la littérature du moyen âge a cessé de suffire. ... C'est depuis qu'on a vu des réputations européennes se fonder sur la lecture ou sur la traduction d'une chanson de geste.*²¹⁴

For him, French academic output was becoming increasingly mediocre since, in its desire to emulate Germanic scholarship, it was far too attached to competition about who translated first, who edited first, who spoke about a given poem first and so on. Therefore, it was necessary for French academics (and, in Brunetière's, view, especially medievalists) to stop engaging in intellectual conflict and just to get on with their task, namely the philological, historical and critical analysis of texts and documents.

²¹² Brunetière, "L'érudition contemporaine et la littérature française du moyen âge," 11.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

In conclusion, in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, scholars began to problematise the system upon which Gaston Paris's analyses of the epics had been based. The labels romantic and positivistic now started to lose their importance, as scholars such as Bédier realised that the supposed positivism of Gaston Paris's generation had suffered from the very same romanticism it had attacked in the generation before. The work of both groups was bound to be subjective and, for Bédier, it inevitably had to be so. The conflict between nationalism, which shaped medieval studies and was shaped by medieval studies, and the search for historical truth led to analyses which today are considered dated, although they still persist in modern scholarly work.

If the study of the epic made relations between France and Germany and the clash between romanticism and positivism a key question in the nineteenth century, then the study of the *fabliaux* was to raise the issue of the limits of positivism in terms of philological analysis, comparative linguistics and mythology and also to problematise French nationalism with regard to the shocking plots of the *fabliaux*. If the medieval epic became a "poem without a poet" due to nationalism and the idea of a popular creation of epics, then the *fabliaux* became "poems without poetics," in that they were thought to represent the reality of French bourgeois life in the fourteenth century, as will be seen in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

GASTON PARIS AND SCIENCE: THE *FABLIAUX* AND THE CASE OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY ORIENTALISM

*Gaston Paris n'avait d'autre religion que la religion de la philologie.*¹

In the previous chapter, I argued that Gaston Paris adopted elements of German scholarship (some may say almost exclusively from German romantic scholars), to arrive at his views on the medieval epic. Likewise, I tried to show how his analysis can be seen as both romantic (in terms of the ideas on which his analysis was based) and positivistic (based on the rigorous methodology that he used). In this chapter, I will look at Paris's work on the *fabliaux* in order to comprehend how Paris developed his theories about these short tales, basing his assumptions on two key elements: first, a methodology which used philological investigation in literary criticism; and, second, an idealisation of the intellectual and cultural exchanges between East and West in the Middle Ages. As we shall see, while the first element links Paris to the positivistic-scientific tradition, the second element seems to point to the perseverance of a romantic line of thought in spite of Paris's claims to the contrary.

In order to proceed to this investigation, I will first address the source of Paris's views on the subject at the time when the *fabliaux*, being seen as tales coming from India, fell into the broad category of nineteenth-century Orientalism. I shall investigate what was meant by Orientalism, the importance and role of this field of studies, and how the prevailing theories of the origins of Indo-European languages and literary genres intertwined with modern notions of nationhood in France. In Chapter Two, my main concern was with the conflict (intellectual and otherwise) between France and Germany and how this affected French nationalism; here, I will be examining how the notion of Indo-Europeanism affected, and was affected by, French nationalism.

¹ Monod, "Nécrologue, Gaston Paris," 73 (emphasis in original).

The Intellectual Context of Nineteenth-century Orientalism

One practical application of the so-called scientific-positivistic methodology in terms of a rigorous method for human sciences can be seen in the institutionalisation, as academic disciplines, of literature, linguistics, philology and comparative mythology in the years 1850–70, many of these being founded under the label of what was then called Orientalism. Of course, linguistics and philology were not invented in the late eighteenth century, as nineteenth-century scholars liked to believe. Nevertheless, this particular stage of the history of linguistics and philology was crucial because it imprinted on those studies aspects that they still possess today. In their struggle to ensure the scientific legitimacy of their studies, French scholars, in particular, gave linguistics and philology quite different features from those which they had received in the previous century. In order to verify how this change influenced the emergence of medievalism as Gaston Paris understood it, it is essential to assess the scientific-positivistic contribution to the field of oriental studies and nineteenth-century medievalism. It will be useful to discuss Gaston Paris's texts and to compare his Orientalism with that of his predecessors and once again identify positive and romantic elements in his theories and methods of analysis. Understanding academic output in human sciences as a synthesis of both these moral and philosophical approaches, along with others such as realism and naturalism,² seems a more fruitful approach than those which either focus on nineteenth-century historiographical production as exclusively romantic or positivistic or find no use for these labels at all. The point here is that medievalists used a scientific-positivistic methodology in contrast with romanticism as pertaining to academic work. In doing so, they legitimated the disciplines associated with medieval studies (history, literary criticism and philology) while they recreated the French national past.

² Realism and naturalism are tendencies of nineteenth-century thinking that have been less likely to raise discussion than romanticism and positivism. Especially in France, these doctrines have been associated above all with literature and literary style. In the field of the sciences, they kept their meaning close to biology and natural history through the correlation of naturalism and Darwinism and Spencerism, among others. Then again, in France, naturalism and Darwinism, in its form of social Darwinism, never gained great acceptance in the human sciences in the late nineteenth century. The loss of the Franco-Prussian War represented a complicated face of Darwin's concept of "natural selection" with which the French could not but disagree. See Henry, "Anti-Darwinism in France," 291–301.

First of all, I will outline how studies of the *fabliaux* (part of the broader field of Orientalism) represented not only an investigation of the origins of French literature, but also of France's literature in the European setting. As with any other term, Orientalism has to be defined in a particular context. In the twentieth century, the notion of Orientalism was attached, as in Edward Said's work, to a vision of Asia as an intellectual construction by Europeans. Said argued that European cultures have a tendency to define themselves through a contrast with other cultures. In the sixteenth century, European intellectuals underlined the difference between their culture and that of the inhabitants of the Americas to make themselves intellectually superior. In the nineteenth century, however, the contrast was between Europe and Asia as, once more, a form of intellectual domination linked to a political and economical one.³

Yet, while Orientalism as a term suggests to us an attitude of prejudice and discrimination linked to nineteenth-century imperialism, the same is not necessarily true for nineteenth-century usage of the term. In the 1850s, Orientalism primarily meant studies of the East, that is, literature, language, history and culture.⁴ There was no basic negative connotation attached to the term, which was used to refer to research on the East and to the people who performed such studies (the Orientalists). If there was a political sentiment towards the East, it was one stressing a common past, not, as in the twentieth century, one stressing the East as cultural other. Max Müller's words to the 1874 Congress of Orientalists in London exemplify this attitude:

The East, formerly a land of dreams, of fables, and fairies, has become to us a land of unmistakable reality. The curtain between the West and the East has been lifted, and our old forgotten home stands before us again in bright colours and definite outlines ... The East is ours, we are its heirs, and claim by right our share in its inheritance.⁵

Müller was making a point about the existence of cultural links between East and West. European scholars claimed that Asia and Europe were once the same, and they argued that they shared the same language roots and the same customs. As a result, Europe and Asia should again become closer in future. The East, as Müller put it, belonged to the

³ Said, *Orientalismo*, 61.

⁴ Ibid. 51.

⁵ Müller, "Opening address, delivered by the President of the Aryan section at the International Congress of Orientalists, September 14–21, 1874," in his *Selected essays on language, mythology and religion*, II, 9–10.

Europeans. The idea of European power and superiority was perfectly visible, underlying the nascent disciplines of linguistics, philology and history. The emergence of academic fields essentially justified, on rational and logical grounds, expansionism and colonisation. As Renan said: “*La colonisation en grand est une nécessité politique tout à fait de premier ordre ... La conquête d’un pays de race inférieure par une race supérieure, qui s’y établit pour le gouverner, n’a rien de choquant.*”⁶ Of course, the French were not happy when the German Empire deprived them of their own territories of Alsace and Lorraine, but this was the subject matter of Chapter Two.

Oriental studies were important for late nineteenth-century medievalists as they introduced new areas of knowledge, such as mythological studies and comparative literature into the more general field of medieval studies.⁷ In addition to this, oriental studies were a laboratory for scientific-positivistic assumptions and methods, such as the transparency of language and textual analysis which medievalists were to adopt. For example, Gaston Paris’s work on the medieval literary genre called *fabliaux* related to Orientalism, as it shows that Paris was aware that Asian culture was different from European culture, and that he thought that European culture was superior. If sometimes the exoticism of Asia was praised, at other times it was regarded, if not as entirely undesirable, then at least as something that needed re-evaluation if it was to be incorporated into European culture. The East was thus always seen from the point of view of its relationship with Europe, rather than as an independent area which had produced languages and literature to be enjoyed in their own right. The analysis of oriental languages and texts was thus undeniably Eurocentric.

For this reason, Orientalism was an important presence in nineteenth-century academic life. Its significance was closely associated with the idea of an Indo-European community, one which would legitimate and encourage the cultural, political and economic interchange between East and West. Beginning with a search for origins, several linguists and grammarians, Silvestre de Sacy, Michel Bréal and Max Müller among them, based their work on the existence of a common past of the European and Asiatic peoples. For them, philology, grammar, comparative mythology, history and linguistics all pointed to the existence of an original Indo-European language. These new sciences, which until the early nineteenth century had remained separate, came together in the late

⁶ Renan, “La réforme intellectuelle et morale de la France,” 62.

⁷ See, for example, the interesting article by Bergounioux and Chevalier, “Gaston Paris et la mythologie comparée.”

part of that century as weapons in support of a shared Indo-Europeanism. Yet in doing so, each science obtained a separate academic status, which gave prestige to those who pursued it. In the context of political domination and geographical expansionism, to legitimise such an Indo-European community meant to prove European superiority,⁸ to call attention to Europe's spiritual strength,⁹ and to justify the domination of Europeans over the Asiatic peoples.¹⁰ Although the object of the works of these scholars was not directly political, nonetheless it had important political implications. The ground for European imperialism was prepared, and very soon domination would be seen not only as a historical inevitability, but also as a mission to help those who supposedly needed the benefits of European rule.

In this sense, scientific activity was important for scholars and the French government, not only because of the growth of academic knowledge which it involved, but also because, especially in what concerned Indo-Europeanism, it had fundamental political repercussions. Another phase of academicism was emerging, a very pragmatic one, distant from the contemplative character of the *studia humanitatis* of the previous centuries. In the past, humanities were not based on empirical observation, being mostly characterised by a hypothetical-deductive approach, an example of which can be seen in Legrand d'Aussy's work on the *fabliaux*, which summarised the tales and their explicit morals while raising questions about their origins and audience that Legrand d'Aussy himself could not answer. In the late nineteenth century, by contrast, scholars like Gaston Paris adopted what they saw as an empirical-inductive approach in their search for the roots of European culture, a search which involved finding the origins of the *fabliaux*. Lines of thought such as uniformitarianism, a method based on the assumption that the observation of the present leads to the formulation of plausible inferences about the past, gained widespread popularity in the study of philology and geology in this period.¹¹ Furthermore, equating the methods of the new human sciences with those of the natural sciences (including geology, biology and chemistry among others) led early nineteenth-century linguists and philologists to see themselves as scientists beyond any doubt and thus far removed from the virtuous, contemplative characteristic of scholars in previous centuries.

⁸ Paris, "Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge," 75–6.

⁹ Bréal, "Hercule et Cacus," 74.

¹⁰ Müller, "Comparative philology of the Indo-European languages in its bearing on the early civilisation of mankind," 109.

¹¹ Christy, "Uniformitarianism in nineteenth-century linguistics," 249.

A key aspect of oriental studies in the years between 1850 and 1870 was the use of the methods of the natural sciences in linguistic, philological and cultural research. The status of some sciences as human or natural became a matter for interpretation, with some claiming that even linguistics and philology were to be seen as natural sciences, akin to geology. Linguistics, comparative mythology and philology became sister disciplines to those in the human sciences (although 30 years later they became known as “ancillary sciences” without a method of their own).¹² The awkward relationship forcibly developed between these different fields of knowledge is now often taken to have involved little more than an effort by scholars in the human sciences to copy the methods used in the natural sciences.¹³ This is only partially true. The relationship between the human and natural sciences was in fact more complex, raising issues such as the relationship between the methodological project of human sciences and moral ideology during the late 1800s. After 1840, positivism in this context came to be seen more specifically as a systematic approach to language and literature. As will become clearer in this chapter, in a sense this project linked the methods used by scholars to examine and understand medieval texts (as documentary evidence of the past) to the theories supporting the study of humans (who lived this past and therefore produced something of a testimony about it).

The distinction between *les lettres* and *les sciences proprement dites* made by scholars such as Sacy, Müller and Havet evolved from being a basic difference between history (including literature and all the disciplines attached to that field) and the natural sciences, to something more subtle and problematical in terms of methodology and theory. How could scholars (Gaston Paris among them), who were struggling to reassure themselves and the public that their work was scientific, ensure that the human sciences were just as trustworthy as the natural sciences? If Comte’s philosophical arguments were not used directly to solve this problem, his enthusiasm for the engagement of scholars in educational projects, rather than in public activities, certainly was. One thing was clear: scholars claimed for themselves an important role in society, a role that could not be performed by politicians, but only by academics whose time was to be spent in the constant research necessary to solve issues relating to culture, language, philosophy and social theory. Using the

¹² See Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques*, Part II. Seignobos was the sole author of this Part.

¹³ See Koerner, “Positivism in 19th and 20th century linguistics,” 191–209 and “The natural science impact on theory formation in 19th and 20th century linguistics,” 47–76.

inductive method to convert particular facts into general rules of human behaviour, fields of knowledge until then close to the old field of humanities were transformed into an appended group of the physical sciences. But did this mean that these disciplines had (or should have) a separate method of their own? And what impact did this dispute over method have on medieval studies, and on studies of the *fabliaux* in particular?

The dispute about independence between the human and physical sciences (whose representatives claimed ownership of the methodology) had a major impact on nineteenth-century Parisian academic life. It led scholars such as Müller and Whitney, Bréal and Schleicher (all well versed in mythography, Indo-Europeanism and the long-lost links between the two cultures) to become embroiled in an academic debate which became known as the *querelle des sciences*.¹⁴ In particular, their debate over the classification of philology as a human or physical science (although it did not involve Gaston Paris directly) is crucial for an understanding of Gaston Paris's justifications of the scientific and valid character of his own philological research, as we will see.

The New Idea of Science

One of the most passionate advocates of the classification of comparative philology among the natural sciences was the German scholar Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), an Orientalist whose work had great influence on Gaston Paris's analysis of the *fabliaux*. A teacher at Oxford from 1868 until his death, Müller tried to prove that by adopting scientific methods, mythology, language studies and philology no longer needed to be confined to the realm of theology and philosophy. His argument was that linguistics had now been established on a scientific basis. If philology, which Müller defined as the study of history of words, had constituted itself as a historical science, comparative philology, being the study of a network of languages and their historical grammar, was then a natural science with the same intellectual status as physics, chemistry and geology.¹⁵

Müller based his argument on the principle that the scientific disciplines depend on two elements: method and object. The particular object of physics, for instance, is the whole of nature; that of geology is

¹⁴ Adam, "La linguistique: est-elle une science naturelle ou une science historique?" 388.

¹⁵ Müller, *Lectures on the science of language*, 20–1.

specifically rocks. All natural sciences were supposed to have a method which involved three separate stages: the empirical, the classificatory and the theoretical. In linguistics, the first step, the empirical stage, should involve the identification, in a given language, of its constitutional elements; the second step would be to classify these elements in relation to other languages and make etymological associations; the third step should then produce theoretical formulations referring to that language and its place in human development and the history of linguistics. As a science, comparative philology and its object (language) had passed through these three stages. The method of comparative philology, however, was closer to physics than to history. That is why, Müller said, comparative philology had to be part of the “standard of inductive sciences.”¹⁶ For Gaston Paris, too, philology was thoroughly inductive and not deductive, although his method, as we shall see, sometimes actually demonstrated the opposite.

Müller was one of the initiators of the application of principles of scientific knowledge to linguistics and philology, which made him a reference point when Paris first introduced the theme of the *fabliaux* in 1874.¹⁷ Müller’s main concern was with the correlation between rational human faculties and the biological aspects of language (movements of the muscles of the mouth, respiration and gesture). He claimed that linguistic roots were created from the observation of nature and the association of words and their meanings.¹⁸

In spite of Müller’s authoritative ideas on the classification of sciences, the dispute about whether some of the human sciences were, in effect, to be seen as physical sciences persisted in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The problem of nationality, for example, entered the question of the scientific character of philology in the early 1880s, when Louis Havet, professor of Latin philology at the Collège de France, called attention to the fact that the applications and purposes of the use of the scientific method were not the same in Germany as they were in France.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid., 22–4.

¹⁷ Paris, “Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge,” 70–5.

¹⁸ He used as an example the word “squirrel” that the bow-wow theorists consider to be the reproduction of the sound the animal makes, and he proves to originate from a Greek word created from the agglutination of the words for “shade” and “tail” (Müller, *Lectures on the science of language*, 350–1).

¹⁹ In late nineteenth-century France, positivism was associated with production of scientific knowledge. In France science was supposed to be an instrument for a more democratic society, but it was also largely a project of the elite, whereas in Germany, the process of turning academia into an institution for the masses

He reduced the sciences to two fields: those with objects whose laws are universally valid or permanent (mathematics, physics and so on) and those whose laws were historically specific or temporary (such as history). Arguing that philology is “*la méthode de rechercher de l’histoire*,” Havet redefined philology, making it lose its character as either a natural or a historical science and defining it as a method, which meant that philology was an instrument in fields of knowledge such as history or mythology, rather than being a field of knowledge in itself.²⁰

The debate continued. The status of philology as a natural rather than a human science was important for medievalists and Orientalists such as Gaston Paris because it legitimised philological studies, in the sense that the knowledge produced was thought to be scientific. In 1888, Adrian Naville, a teacher at the Académie de Neuchâtel, published a book that set the tone for the classification of sciences in the early twentieth century. Dividing the sciences into three groups: “*sciences du réel*” or sciences of contingency (history); sciences of laws (mathematics) and sciences of the ideal (morals, ethics and aesthetics), Naville changed the debate from the *nature* of the object or method applied to the effects of each science in society.²¹ The denomination of natural sciences disappeared in this scheme. For Naville, the lines of demarcation between these three forms of sciences as he depicted them were clear and obvious. Naville’s argument was not entirely convincing, but it did create an impact and led to the division of sciences into the three categories which he proposed in French academia.

Despite the efforts by academics to create a new classification of sciences, Gaston Paris himself was not really a part of the debate, in that he did not attempt to put forward a case for the classification of philology.²² Definitions seemed to make him rather uncomfortable. Even regarding the classification of his own area of expertise, Romance philology, which gave its name to his chair at the Collège de France, he was silent,²³ having only used this term in a few of his texts, and not once endeavouring to explain what he understood by it.²⁴ His was thus an unusual position, considering that most contemporary scholars were

combined with the less clear interest in a democratic order (Charle, “*Les universités germaniques*,” 9–11).

²⁰ Havet, “*La philologie*,” 634.

²¹ Naville, *De la classification des sciences*, 1–19.

²² See, for example, Paris, “*Collection philologique*, par M. Bréal,” 241–4.

²³ Böhler, “*Notes sur l’acception du terme de philologie romane chez Gaston Paris*,” 23–40.

²⁴ Paris, “*L’enseignement de la philologie romane à Paris et en Allemagne*,” 623.

desperately trying to define, classify and create theories about their sciences. The only definition Paris created was that of the “muses of history,” that is, the different aspects of historical activities such as cultural history, economic history and the history of ideas; yet, amid the series of histories that he named, he never referred to the history of philology as a separate field, simply mentioning the importance of the *sciences historiques et philologiques* to France as a nation.²⁵ When Paris died, Brunetière declared that Paris’s works, taken all together, answered the question “what is philology” by showing what it was in practice and how it should be applied.²⁶ His former student Gabriel Monod called attention to Paris’s understanding of philology in the wider sense, “*comme la connaissance de tout le passé d’un pays*.”²⁷ For Gaston Paris, Böhler argued, philology was a synonym for historical linguistics, and although he treated his philological research as an independent field of expertise, he always discussed it as a part of history itself.²⁸

Etymological research in the study of linguistics, mythology, philology and history thus generated cultural security as well as scientific knowledge in the late nineteenth century as part of a quest to identify the roots of the Indo-European past. Asia and Europe were once one; their values and culture could be seen as similar, and their geographical proximity and the amicable relationship between them meant that many aspects of Asian literature had been assimilated into European culture.²⁹ Although some authors (Michel Bréal among them, as we will see) emphasised the discontinuity between a primitive Asian-European culture and modern European culture (classical antiquity being the moment when modernity can be seen to have started), others (like Gaston Paris) claimed that the underlying linguistic and cultural principles were common to Eastern and Western morality alike.³⁰ The point is that in the nineteenth century it seemed meaningless to study Europe without the aid of oriental studies, as the conclusions drawn from a comparative study would be far more positivistic, that is, scientifically valid. This is what Gaston Paris, in

²⁵ Paris, “L’Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres. Séance annuelle,” 621–2.

²⁶ Brunetière, “Funérailles de M. Gaston Paris,” 81.

²⁷ Monod, “Nécrologue, Gaston Paris,” 65.

²⁸ Böhler, “Notes sur l’acception du terme de philologie romane chez Gaston Paris,” 34.

²⁹ Silvestre de Sacy, *Ouverture du cours de Samskrit et de Chinois*, 4.

³⁰ See Bréal, “Hercule et Cacus,” where the author emphasises the differences between the two cultures (73–7), and Paris, “Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge” (89), where the author emphasises the parallels.

studying the Orientalists before him, concluded, and this is the idea he put forward when he started writing about the *fabliaux* in 1874.

Orientalists before Gaston Paris

An interest in Indo-European identity was accepted by nineteenth-century academics as an obvious part of the search for the European past and its roots. Basing their arguments on the scientific observation of language and culture, Orientalists believed themselves to be contributing to the progress of human sciences, of literary, historical and philological studies. Scientific-positivistic in their method, they created a system which they believed could explain where cultures came from, obeying a need to find the root source of all things. The object of their study was language and its components (phonetic sounds, roots, words), and its justification was the fact that the languages were thought to be transparent, that is, there was no need for interpretation, no “reading between the lines” in a historical document. Different branches of oriental studies, like Müller’s so-called Aryanism, led to speculative formulations regarding the European past, such as the supposed pioneering character of the Indo-European race in exploring other territories and thus separating from the Indo-European whole, and also its mission to bring it back together once more.³¹

The debates on Indo-Europeanism and Orientalism had several different branches in the nineteenth century. The important ones are those which were part of Gaston Paris’s intellectual formation: Silvestre de Sacy’s philological Orientalism, Max Müller’s etymological Orientalism and Michel de Bréal’s linguistic Orientalism. An examination of their work will help to establish the context for the Orientalism which Gaston Paris was to apply to his own studies of the French *fabliaux*.

Silvestre de Sacy

Antoine-Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838) was the first publicly acclaimed Orientalist. He was the founder of the Société des études asiatiques (1822), the inspector of oriental letters at the Imprimerie royale, and was responsible for starting numerous courses and societies in Paris aimed at an academic community which was sadly unfamiliar with the Oriental classics.³² His major field was Arabic studies, but he also wrote

³¹ See Leopold, “Max Müller and the linguistic study of civilization,” 34.

³² Duc de Broglie, *Éloge de M. le Baron Silvestre de Sacy*, 7.

several articles on Indian and Chinese texts. Known by his contemporaries as a man of “*principes austères, des croyances inébranlables, des convictions positives, solides, raisonnées*,”³³ Sacy’s theories on the study of language as the key to the human mind were used in most major nineteenth-century human sciences. Sacy’s influence is to be found in texts by Bréal, Müller and Gaston Paris on Indian literature and mythology, his work representing the first effort to develop a coherent methodology in oriental studies. Sacy argued that the way to know a distant culture is either by the archaeological study of it or through the study of its language:

*La connaissance des langues, au contraire, peut dispenser de la fatigue des voyages; elle ménage le tems [sic] si court de la vie, et les forces physiques, si nécessaires à l’exercice des forces morales ... Ajoutons que les langues portent en elles-mêmes un des traits les plus caractéristiques des nations, que le degré de civilisation d’un peuple, ses opinions, la tendance de ses facultés morales et intellectuelles, sont fortement empreintes dans son idiome.*³⁴

For him, language was the best way to reconstruct the fundamental characteristics of a nation, because an archaic language revealed the primitive state of a group of people, their oldest form of identity which would then prevail through time. Through the collections of texts, the comprehensive *chrestomathies*, one could reconstruct the East and unveil its obscure meanings. This, of course, was not guaranteed; Sacy’s motivation was highly subjective, and it is unclear if he would have continued to research archaic languages if he had not found a way to trace parallels between Asiatic and European languages. The problem is that in tracing parallels, he was not simply finding a correlation between the languages (and the people who spoke them) so much as creating them. As Said claimed, the East presented by Sacy was not the actual East, but a subjective reproduction of what the Europeans believed the East to be.³⁵

Max Müller

The Orientalist who had perhaps the greatest influence on Paris was Max Müller. Müller is regarded as one of the pioneers of the study of etymology and the theory of linguistics in the UK, several decades after

³³ Ibid., 4.

³⁴ Silvestre de Sacy, *Ouverture des cours de Samskrit et de Chinois*, 2–3.

³⁵ Said, *Orientalismo*, 133–4.

they had become an important part of the German academic culture. Müller's studies of Sanskrit served as a trigger for Paris's study of the dead languages and their development into modern ones. Later historiographical works, such as those by Koerner, Bologna and Christy, refer to him as a Sanskritist or an Aryanist.³⁶ Müller's object was the Indo-European past, that period in history when the Aryan race supposedly exercised command over the Slavs, Latins, Indians, Persians and other nations. The purpose of his studies was to demonstrate the linguistic domination that once existed and to show how natural it would be if this dominance should exist again.³⁷

As noted above, Müller (like Gaston Paris) did not intend political action against Asia to follow from his conclusions. Like most academics of his time, he explicitly advocated the impartiality of academia in the late nineteenth century, and he rejected the influence of internal or external politics:

Nationality, it seems to me, has as little to do with scholarship as with logic. ... National jealousies and animosities have no place in the republic of letters, which is, and I trust always will be, the true international republic of all friends of work, of order, and of truth.³⁸

It was, however, naive to consider that academic works would not be used politically. In his discourse of order, method and truth, Müller was part of the long list of European academics who used positivism as a synonym for a scientific method. They sought to show, using comparative literature, language and mythology, that the roots of words, legends and stories in different nations of Europe and Asia were to be found in a common ground. For Müller, this common ground was not so much a geographic space as a specific time in the past. In this prehistoric time, Müller claimed one could find the true evidence of the community of Indo-European races.

Müller was, as we have seen, one of the key authors in the debate on whether philology and linguistics should be considered as natural or historical sciences. In defending the claim that they belonged to the historical sciences, Müller was the first historian Orientalist. He

³⁶ See Koerner, "Positivism in 19th and 20th century linguistics," 191–209, and "The natural science impact on theory formation in 19th and 20th century linguistics," 47–76; Bologna, *Ricerca etimologica e ricostruzione culturale*; and Christy, "Uniformitarianism in nineteenth-century linguistics," 249–56.

³⁷ Müller, "Comparative philology of the Indo-European languages," 111.

³⁸ Müller, *Selected essays on language, mythology and religion*, I, 623.

emphasised the nation's need for history at a certain point in its development:

History begins when history begins to produce history, i.e. when people have arrived at a certain degree of historical consciousness, when they begin to feel a want of connecting their own political existence with the memory of the past & the hopes of the future & thus leave to posterity the tradition of former generations & literary records of their own age.³⁹

Müller also introduced into his etymological and philological analysis another element, one already developed by Silvestre de Sacy: through the study of language, one can understand how a nation lived and thought, this being as true for the study of a dead language as of a contemporary one. This is an aspect of Müller's work which was to be central to Gaston Paris's analyses of the oriental influence in medieval literature in France. Because of their shared view that language and culture were inseparable, they both saw foreign influences as harmful to the development of a group of people, since any foreign word introduced into a culture would carry values, feelings and meanings that were not native.⁴⁰

Michel Bréal

Michel Bréal (1832–1915) was the third Orientalist whom Paris followed and admired and with whom he exchanged ideas. Co-founders of the *Revue critique*, Bréal and Paris agreed on many elements of the Orientalist programme. Bréal himself was not a medievalist, and his intellectual relationship with Paris was in the field of the theory of literature and history rather than specifically in the study of the Middle Ages. His area of expertise was classical and comparative mythology. It was as a result of his notion of the parallels between ancient Vedic mythology and that of Greece in the fourth century preceding the Christian era that Paris started researching the possible oriental origins for the French *fabliaux*. For Bréal, also a disciple of Müller's Aryanism, language was the interpretative key to an understanding of myths and legends, the oldest form of communication elaborated by the Indo-European race in the primitive period of their existence.⁴¹

³⁹ Müller, *Comparative philology of the Indo-European languages*, 109.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 131–9.

⁴¹ Bréal, "Les progrès de la grammaire comparée," 156–7. Müller called his theory "Aryanism," not "Indo-Europeanism," so I used the original expression here.

During the late nineteenth century, the validity of the concept of the interpretive sciences was much debated, because the aim of scholars was to make their studies scientific rather than interpretive. Gaston Paris, for example, was averse to the idea that literature required interpretation. This distinction between hermeneutics (interpretation) and factual analysis (allegedly capable of unveiling the truth) appears in several works by Müller, Bréal, Paris and others. Bréal, for example, did not consider mythological studies to be part of any interpretive science.⁴² He argued that only through etymology could one build a hermeneutic system capable of explaining fable and myths. Etymology implied not merely the interpretation of data, but the study of language-based facts, that is, there was a scientific validation of any conclusion arising from etymologic work. Hermeneutics, as a science, was based on etymology and critical analysis; interpretation, on the other hand, was not a science, it was based solely on subjective points of view. He departed from this premise in his work on classical mythology, when he claimed that “*les fables ne contiennent aucun mystère; elles ne sont ni des faits historiques déguisés, ni des allégories, ni des métaphores, ni des symboles.*”⁴³ Bréal’s understanding about classical fables was the same as that of Gaston Paris, who, as we shall see, saw in medieval fables and the *fabliaux* texts which did not require interpretation, that is, their meaning was transparent.

Bréal claimed that since myths belonged to a time when words were supposed to have only a literal meaning, their original meaning could only be found in nature. He drew a correspondence between language, myth and nature, aiming to explain that myths are intended as a means to explain natural phenomena rationally. Therefore, for Bréal, with a hint of escapism, it was in nature itself that one would find the true (and lost) meaning of myths. “*Le mythe,*” he said, “*s’évanouit au moment où l’on serre de près les termes qui l’expriment: il nous laisse, en se dissipant, en présence de la nature.*”⁴⁴ As a linguist, Bréal claimed that myths were less likely to generate different interpretations than history itself, because he believed that their meaning was obvious because it was natural. Bréal did

⁴² His analysis contrasted with that of Domenico Comparetti, who claimed that the only way to interpret myths is by seeing them as allegories. In his analysis of Latin legends and their medieval versions, Comparetti emphasised, rather than etymology, the value of interpretation of myths and legends. For him, not only do they not have just one meaning (Bréal’s hypothesis), but also their meaning is entirely dependent on the context where they have been used (Comparetti, *Virgilio nel medio evo*).

⁴³ Bréal, “Hercule et Cacus,” 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 102.

not regard myths as historical sources, because their primary function in primitive societies was to explain natural phenomena, not to tell the truth. Studying the parallels between Vedic and Greek mythology, he concluded that the former was not only more ancient than the latter, but was part of the origins of Greek mythology: “*C’est donc aux védas qu’il faudra d’abord recourir quand nous voudrons constater à la fois l’identité de race des peuples ariens et l’affinité de leur génie.*”⁴⁵ Thus, for Bréal, a comparative analysis of the origin and development of many legends was the way to know European culture in its various manifestations throughout the course of history, since those legends must have been produced in a distant time of human history. Although Paris shared Bréal’s ideas about the non-interpretive character of literary criticism, Paris did not agree with Bréal’s hypothesis of a specific time when myths were created. Rather, Paris argued that temporality was an irrelevant aspect of the formulation of myths and legends, and that all the primary myths had been created in India over the centuries, with surviving adaptations having been transmitted since then.

Paris’s ideas on the importance of comparative literature can be found in a large number of his articles, but it is perhaps in his ideas on the *fabliaux* that it is possible for us to understand not only his thoughts about literature, but also about oriental studies and mythology. Following Silvestre de Sacy’s notion of European texts as having oriental roots, Paris appropriated Sacy’s and Bréal’s theories, and argued that the *fabliaux*, a literary form characteristic of the later Middle Ages in France, had its roots in ancient Vedic tales. The method he used to arrive at this conclusion, as we will see, combined epistemological elements of positivism with some attributes which Paris himself might have been pressed to define as romantic, if he had attempted to define them at all. In the next section, I will outline Paris’s theories about the *fabliaux* as representative of Indian myths and, at the same time, of the everyday life of the medieval French bourgeoisie. Then, as I did when looking at Gaston Paris’s study of the epic genre, I will visit the criticism to his work by his fellow scholars and then by his faithful students.

Gaston Paris and the French *fabliaux*

In 1874, when Gaston Paris began his studies of the French *fabliaux*, he was already an authority on philological studies and a well-respected medievalist. His doctoral thesis *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne* (1865)

⁴⁵ Ibid., 74.

was awarded the Prix Gobert; he was head of the recently created chair of medieval literature and language at the Collège de France; and he had just been made president of the Société de littérature de Paris (1873). Having spent almost 15 years studying the epic and medieval lyric, Paris was confident that French literature had a central place in the study of the languages and culture of the European Middle Ages.

Paris claimed that the epic and the lyric were European literary genres rather than foreign imports, in that they had been created with the influence of Europeans only and had been established in a remote period of the French past. However, he did not think the same of the *fabliaux*, a genre which he believed to have originally come from India. He claimed that the plots of these Indian tales were adapted into the short stories known as *fabliaux* in France in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. One of Paris's main purposes in writing about these texts was to prove that although the French had embraced forms of literature that came from faraway lands between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, they creatively modified them, making it possible to consider them a significant part of the tradition of French literature.⁴⁶

In order to explain how foreign tales had been incorporated into French culture, Gaston Paris drew a comparison with the import of vegetable species from Europe to Australia.⁴⁷ By applying methods of biology to human studies, he was adopting a procedure usual at that time. According to Paris, in the observation of foreign plants incorporated into Australia, one could see how well adjusted the foreign samples became, in some cases even leading to the disappearance of the original species. In his opinion, the same could be said of the *fabliaux*, which had been created in India but then perfectly adapted to French conditions. In his first lecture on the *fabliaux*, Paris kept his audience in suspense, not revealing until the very end the name of the genre he had been describing, the *fabliaux*, and associating the genre with the name of the doctrine he was advocating: Orientalism. In his written work and lecture transcripts, Paris enjoyed presenting topics with as many details as he could, moving from point to point, with much elaborate language and an abundance of metaphors. This aspect of his presentation can easily be associated with his style as a somewhat romantic scholar, sharing with scholars of the previous generation the desire to make historical work into an elaborate piece of literature and rhetoric.⁴⁸ Of course, it is also to be seen as a relevant element of his pedagogy.

⁴⁶ Paris, "Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge," 76.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁸ Walch, "Romantisme et positivisme," 163.

Paris claimed that, throughout its history, the whole of French literature had been influenced by some form of external element. Classical antiquity, Celtic tales, oriental stories and Christianity had all been key influences on French culture. He regarded such external elements as negative if they were imposed, but positive if they were voluntarily incorporated. His case against Christianity lay in the fact that he believed it to have been an alien imposition. Gaston Paris was, during his whole life, a critic of the Catholic Church and its role in education and morals. He used medieval history to show the origins of a conflict between society and church, one that had still not been superseded in the late nineteenth century. In his opinion, the adoption of a religion is acceptable, but changing parts of the language from vernacular French to Latin was unacceptable:

*C'est là un événement de grande importance, un fait capital, qui détruisit toute harmonie dans la production littéraire de cette époque: il sépara la nation en deux, et fut doublement funeste, en soustrayant à la culture de la littérature nationale les esprits les plus distingués et les plus instruits, et en les emprisonnant dans une langue morte, étrangère au génie moderne, où une littérature immense et consacrée leur imposait ses idées et ses formes, et où il leur était à peu près impossible de développer quelque originalité.*⁴⁹

For him, the adoption of Christianity had involved more than just the embracing of a religion; it also involved the adoption of Latin and the transformation of the French soul. “*Les conséquences de ce fait*” he said “*sont incalculables: pour un peuple, changer de langue, c’est presque changer d’âme.*”⁵⁰ Nevertheless, he argued, Roman domination had produced one positive result in French literature, namely the creation of the epic genre, which he regarded as the most complete representation of the French national character. As we have seen, Paris claimed that the epic was a product of an external rather than a foreign influence, since Germans, Romans and the French shared so many cultural aspects. While the *fabliaux* were not nearly as precious to the French as the epic, in Paris’s opinion, this genre allowed one to see the capacity for accommodation of French authors, always concerned as they were with their own values and representations.⁵¹ The *fabliaux*, in his point of view, were originally immoral texts which, modified by French authors in order

⁴⁹ Paris, *La littérature française du moyen âge*, 11.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 25.

to entertain (not revolt), were well received by the audiences. He claimed that, in order to maintain their national identity despite so many centuries of cultural exchange, French authors brought in external elements and mixed them with what was “naturally French,” never losing what was national and indigenous.⁵² Whether these external elements would be used as a sole source of inspiration (as was the case with references to classical antiquity so often seen in the epics) or as main themes (as the poems with a Celtic root, such as *Tristan et Iseut*), they always allowed French poets to introduce their own national values and to use their own aesthetic. For him, this was also the case with the Indian influence in French literature.

When historicising Orientalism, Paris followed a similar path to that which he used when establishing the origins of the epic genre and individual French epics. Paris claimed that in the late eighteenth century, Orientalism, as a literary theory, had started and identified Silvestre de Sacy as a pioneer in such studies. He neglected to mention any earlier theories of fables and the *fabliaux*, simply stating that before Sacy scholars had pointed out the Turkish or Persian origins of the French fables, and noting that only after Sacy was it specified that they were Indian.⁵³ He perhaps neglected earlier views because he himself did not really like divergent points of view, always choosing one and pretending that the others did not exist. Thus for Paris, the *fabliaux*⁵⁴ had an Indian origin, as he claimed that:

*La sagesse des Indiens et leur faculté d'invention ingénieuse leur ont fait créer la plus grande partie des courtes fictions qui, sous forme de contes ou de fables, ayant franchi à des époques diverses les mers qui font communiquer l'Inde avec l'Egypte, ou les montagnes qui la séparent de la Perse, circulent depuis des siècles parmi les diverses nations de l'Orient et de l'Occident, les charment par leur sujet et les instruisent par leur morale.*⁵⁵

Paris claimed that one reason that made it possible for the French to accept the *fabliaux* was their fresh morality, characterised by elements such as

⁵² Paris, “Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge,” 78.

⁵³ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁴ One of Paris’s many disagreements with Bédier is related to the name of the short tales. Whereas Bédier called them “*fabliaux*,” Paris called them “*fableaux*,” arguing that the form that Bédier used was a “*barbarisme d’érudit*” (see Paris, “Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge,” 103). Nevertheless, Bédier’s spelling of the short tales prevailed over the original spelling, being the one currently used by academics, and the one adopted here.

⁵⁵ Paris, “Le lai de l’oiselet,” 225.

ascetic values, religious celibacy and a search for spiritual values rather than material ones, consistent with Buddhism and Hinduism. Being similar to Christian morality and yet exotically foreign, the Indian tales which later served as the basis for the *fabliaux* were imported and modified by French poets, who retained their basic themes (social satire, comic aspects of familiar life) while adding others of their own, such as criticism of the clergy and the emerging bourgeoisie. This gave a new, French imprint to the tales and justified their popularity.⁵⁶

How did Paris justify his claim that the *fabliaux* had an Indian origin? He was not the first to claim the Indian origin for the *fabliaux*. Silvestre de Sacy and Loiseleur-Deslongchamps had already stated that these medieval tales had an Indian origin. However, Gaston Paris was dissatisfied with earlier scholars' explanations about how these tales had been transmitted, and by whom. Paris's argument was based on one according to which scholars of previous generations were romantic in their theoretical basis; as a result, if their assertions were to be seen as accurate and truthful, they had to be given a scientific basis. Like most scientific-positivistic scholars of his time, Paris was constantly searching for the origins of texts, for their earliest form. The idea of an Indo-European community is thus central in his texts, as Paris was eager to discover the origins of European thought, culture and language. For him, the key fact supporting the hypothesis of an Indian origin for the *fabliaux* was that:

*Nous ne pouvons oublier que les Indiens et les peuples dominants de l'Europe font partie d'une même race, ont été originairement une seule nation: pendant des siècles, ils ont parlé la même langue, mené la même vie, adoré les mêmes dieux et peut-être déjà chanté les mêmes chants et répété les mêmes contes.*⁵⁷

In order to find out if India was actually the source of these comic tales, Paris used the deductive method, namely the assumption that all fields of study are based on universal laws and that, as such, individual cases must fit into the law if this law is to be proven correct. This was an unusual position for a presumed nineteenth-century positivist, given that the privileged positivist method was inductive, namely the transition from the particular facts to the universal law. However, Paris started his search for the origins of the *fabliaux* with the Orientalist conception of the Indian origins of European tales in mind. He then employed them to prove that his individual cases were part of this law (by scrutinising the plot of

⁵⁶ Paris, "Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge," 82–5.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 89.

individual *fabliaux* and comparing them with ancient Indian tales). In this sense, Paris based his arbitrary analysis on the existence of the law itself (which was not proven) and used the *fabliaux* to prove it; he was thus being deductive and not inductive. As we will see, in his doctoral dissertation on the *fabliaux*, Joseph Bédier attacked this aspect of Paris's analysis, as he was hostile to any deductive approach in human sciences.

Paris's method was, indeed, rather a flawed one. Instead of searching for the actual origins, he merely sought to show that it was not impossible for the *fabliaux* to have an Indian origin. Hence, all Paris needed to do was to prove that this was a plausible theory by showing how the *fabliaux* *could* have reached Western Europe in the twelfth century. He never questioned if it was possible for the *fabliaux* to have had a different origin, and never tried to reconstruct the path followed by the *fabliaux* from their possible creation in Europe to Asia, which would have been an interesting procedure, and one more in line with Paris's own self-proclaimed scientific-positivism.

Having accepted the a priori formulation according to which the *fabliaux* had an Indian origin, Paris's task was to infer the intermediaries between the Indian and French civilisations. Consequently, Paris was faced with the problem of identifying the large number of mediators needed to link the original Indian Ur-texts and the French *fabliaux* because, according to him, the validation of the oriental theory depended on the correct identification of these mediators. Using the most famous Indian collection of tales, the *Panchatantra*, edited by Theodore Benfey in the 1850s, he applied the rule of the intermediary, that is, the hypothetical-deductive association between geography and the process of transmission of the tales of the *Panchatantra*, to identify the oldest version of an original tale (Indian), and the tale's original language (Sanskrit). In his view, this primitive version of the *Panchatantra* was then translated into Pahlavi (a Persian language), and from that version into Syrian. For him, this last version must have been lost, as it left no traces, but, in a happy twist of fate, it had given birth to an Arabic version called *Kalilah et Dimnah*.⁵⁸ From there, the tale must have passed into a Hebrew version (that Paris believed unpublished) and only then was it eventually translated into Latin. From Latin, a poet then translated it into one of the vulgar languages of Europe.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Actually, Paris affirmed that one could not be sure if the Syrian version existed or not, which raises questions as: why did he place this doubtful tale in his scheme of the intermediates? and why he raised, two pages after he argued the existence of that version, the possibility that it may not have existed at all?

⁵⁹ Paris, "Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge," 91.

This complicated pathway constituted Gaston Paris's scientific means of demonstrating the Indian origins of the French *fabliaux*. It could hardly have been more based on subjective assumption. Given that Paris's line of reasoning was based on geography, Paris needed to identify the human mediators who carried the tales from one area to the other, either orally or in written form. He then argued that the Byzantines, the Crusaders and the Jews had been responsible for the diffusion of these texts because of their nomadic character or the extensive travelling they had endured in the twelfth century.⁶⁰ In his eagerness to find the intermediaries, he wrote several short articles on single *fabliaux*, attempting to identify the correct group that transmitted the tales. This can be illustrated in his study of *Saint Josaphat*, in which a pagan king of a small kingdom in India becomes obsessed with a prophecy regarding his son Josaphat, who will become a Christian and so his enemy. Believing it to be a Greek tale in its origins, Paris claimed that this story had been brought into the Christian world in the ninth century, carrying with it an evaluation of Christian values and morality. Paris asserted that the transmission of that story had to have been done as follows:

*Ainsi revêtue d'une forme nouvelle, 'l'histoire édifiante' pénétra du monde grec dans le monde slave, dans le monde latin et dans le monde germanique, fut traduite dans toutes les langues d'Europe, et imposa ses héros – dont l'un était purement fictif, et dont l'autre était le fondateur même du bouddhisme – à l'admiration des chrétiens et à la vénération des Églises.*⁶¹

Yet the existence of various forms of the tales (the original source being seen as having produced different versions scattered around Europe and Asia) was always a problem for this kind of argument. Paris disliked variations per se, because he did not believe that one could learn anything from them; he used them merely to retrieve, from a more recent version of a text, that text's earliest form.⁶² He claimed that the original form was the

⁶⁰ Paris, *La littérature française du moyen âge*, 111.

⁶¹ Paris, "Saint Josaphat," 193–4.

⁶² Regarding variations, Gaston Paris followed Lachmann's theories on the subject. Lachmann's idea was that two scribes copying the same manuscript would not make the same mistakes. Therefore, by analysing surviving manuscripts, a philologist would be able to identify which manuscripts were similar to the others, forming groups or families of manuscripts. These families of manuscripts were to be arranged in a genealogical tree in which the manuscripts were organised on a vertical line by family and on a horizontal line by approximate date, so that one could establish what the original text was.

most representative element with which to reconstruct a long dead culture, arguing that the creation of the medieval French *fabliaux* was, like the creation of epics and lyric poems, determined by the style of each particular period and the French national character. Paris never once considered the possibility of an author or poet whose creativity led him to write a work based of his own individual talent. In the case of the *fabliaux*, he argued that the poet added nothing to the tales, which instead directly reflected day-to-day life.

Another example of the application of Paris's scientific-positivistic method of tracing origins was his analysis of the tale of the *Trois Bossus*, which he thought was an excellent "laboratory for orientalists." The most popular version of this amusing tale told the sad story of three musicians (*bossus*) who were hired to amuse a woman (who was also married to a musician). After having romantic intercourse with all the musicians, the woman stuffed them all in a chest when her suspicious husband was about to come home, which led to the musicians' sudden death; furthermore, their death provided the woman with a good idea about how to rid herself of her husband. The large number of versions of the tale in fourteenth-century Europe led Paris and his students to wonder how it could have been transmitted and how its variations had arisen. Paris used the term *déformation* to refer to the process whereby the structure of a tale was changed due to oral transmission, which must have been the case, for example, in the transmission of the *Trois Bossus* inside Italy.⁶³ It is noteworthy that Paris always used a variety of terms to describe the different processes that happen to texts: thus *variation*, *dérivation*, *accommodation* and *déformation* all refer to the ways in which the texts were transmitted (orally or in writing). These processes were not defined clearly, and they even came to mean slightly different things in different articles. It was precisely because of the constant fluctuation of meaning given to the crucial process of tale transmission that Bédier was to criticise Paris's views on the origins and oral transmission of the *fabliaux*.

Once Paris had established his hypothesis that the key intermediaries between India and France had been the Persians, his next purpose was to analyse whether the *fabliaux* represented a genre that mirrored real life or not: "*Les contes indiens, nés de l'observation directe et ingénieuse des hommes placés dans toutes les conditions sociales, retracent naïvement leur vie et leurs mœurs avec la simplicité et l'absence d'affectation qui*

⁶³ Paris, "Das Fableau von den Trois Bossus Ménestrels, par A. Pillet," 139.

caractérisent encore l'Orient."⁶⁴ The *fabliaux* therefore directly reflected the reality of the time when they were created.

To illustrate Paris's views on the realism of the *fabliaux*, and on their origins and transmission, we can examine his text on the *Lai de l'épervier* (or "*éspervier*," meaning sparrowhawk), which he wrote in 1878. He argued that this particular *lai* could not have had a European origin (unlike the *lais* of Marie de France), because of its complete "absence of musicality," that is, the author was an inferior poet.⁶⁵ The *Lai de l'épervier* is similar to one of the stories told in the *Decameron*, but for Paris this was no proof of their European origin. Comparing it with other *lais de Bretagne* (Marie de France's in particular), he concluded that they were too different to have shared the same origin.

He chose to see the *Lai de l'épervier* as a copy of a story in *Les mille et une nuits*, and he claimed that "*ce joli conte arrive de l'Inde; c'est là du moins que nous le trouvons le plus anciennement.*"⁶⁶ He argued that the tale had been imported from the Orient by oral transmission. The Byzantines could have introduced it to the French during the Crusades, being the intermediaries between the original and its French version. With his knowledge of the epic, Paris argued that whenever a tale was imported, a process of "*accommodation*" happened in order to make the plot acceptable to the new culture:

*Outre ce travail d'accommodation, dont se sont en général si bien tirés les poètes français du moyen âge qui ont naturalisé chez nous les contes orientaux, nous trouvons dans notre lai: quelques changements qui ne sont peut-être pas le fait du poète, mais qui sont, si je ne me trompe, fort à l'avantage du conte.*⁶⁷

Contrasting its alleged original version and the existing *Lai de l'épervier* itself (which survived as a variation in the *Lai de Lanval*, by Marie de France), Paris speculated that when this tale was brought to France in the twelfth century, elements such as the brutality of some characters, references to sex and to deceit and treason were suppressed and other elements were introduced:

Ce conte n'est pas dicté, comme son lointain original sanscrit, par le haine, la crainte et le mépris des femmes; un esprit tout nouveau, qu'on

⁶⁴ Paris, "Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge," 102.

⁶⁵ Paris, "Le lai de l'épervier," 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 14.

croirait déjà, en bien des traits, l'esprit français du XVIII [XIII] siècle, a pénétré le vieux récit et l'a rendu plus malin à la fois et moins méchant."⁶⁸

His study of the *Lai de l'épervier* was his first effort to explain not only the theory of the intermediary, but how these tales had been assimilated into another culture.

Concerning the assimilation of texts, Paris was much less scientific-positivistic than one might have expected, given his own frequent claims about the scientific nature of his own methods. In his famous theory of the intermediary, he used a chart analysis, one similar to the one he used to edit texts,⁶⁹ whereas in his theory of assimilation, he was not so impressive or authoritative. In discussing the reception of the *fabliaux* in the twelfth century, Paris claimed that one reason why the *fabliaux* were assimilated into French culture despite their outrageous content was because they were the first literary genre to deal openly with the bourgeoisie and the contrast between aristocratic and bourgeois values. Paris did not think that these tales were taken seriously, unlike the epic and the lyric, being mostly destined to entertain and cause laughter: "*Leur caractère général est d'être plaisants, et ce caractère est indiqué par plusieurs des noms dont les poètes qualifient leurs récits (une trufe, une bourde, une risée, un gab).*"⁷⁰ However, the laughter they produced was a complicated matter for Paris. One of his most passionate claims in his articles on the *fabliaux* was that these tales were extremely offensive to women, degrading them to a purely sexual position, and portraying them as stupid and untrustworthy, which, for him, was more evidence of the Indian origin of the *fabliaux*:

Quant aux contes innombrables, presque toujours plaisants, trop souvent grossiers, qui ont pour sujet les ruses et les perfidies des femmes, ils ne sont pas nés spontanément de la société du moyen âge: ils proviennent de l'Inde, et ils ont leur raison d'être dans le milieu qui les a produits. Le détachement de tout ce qui excite les désirs et trouble l'âme, la pleine

⁶⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁹ The work that started the great wave of publication of critical editions of medieval texts in late nineteenth-century France was Natalis de Wailly's scientific edition of Joinville's *Histoire de Saint Louis* (1868). His critical edition, however, did not have an immediate impact on French scholarly editions. It was only four years later, with Gaston Paris's *Alexis*, that France would embrace the new scientific method, which was to dominate critical editions until the early 1900s. Gaston Paris's edition of *La vie de Saint Alexis* (1872) was based on Lachmann's method, and was an explicit expression of the desire of French academics to make French scholarship more scientific.

⁷⁰ Paris, *La littérature française du moyen âge*, 113.

*possession de soi-même, la crainte des attaches et des peines mondaines, tel est l'esprit de la doctrine bouddhique.*⁷¹

Howard Bloch argued that an investigation of the study of the *fabliaux* in the nineteenth century reveals to us how much literary and historical analysis at the time depended on purely subjective feelings. Admiring the East on the one hand, yet eager to displace whatever was “less noble,” that is, rude, sexual and grotesque, to the faraway lands of Asia on the other, the Orientalist analysis of the *fabliaux* was at a crossroads. The issue was how to retain the noble and acceptable aspects of the comic tales as a French literary creation, while rejecting the exotic and less noble ones as part of an alien tradition. Putting emphasis, at one point, on difference, and at another on similarity, French medievalists failed to understand the less noble elements in their actual medieval context, but instead displaced them to another context, one which they themselves would not then have to analyse.⁷² As we will see, nineteenth-century medievalists were faced with a similar problem when it came to the tales of the Arthurian cycle, especially *Tristan et Iseut*.

In his attempt to reject the less noble aspects of the tales as alien while holding on to the entertaining part of the *fabliaux* as representative of French thinking, Gaston Paris argued that some aspects of the observation of social reality found in the *fabliaux* could only have been a French addition to the texts. He used a social example: Indian society was divided into castes, but the *fabliaux* are silent about this issue. Such differences between the social structures of India and France meant that when imported, the *fabliaux* had to be remodelled to suit French tastes. “*Composés pour les chevaliers et les bourgeois*,” Paris said, “*ils se moquent habituellement des vilains et surtout des clercs*.”⁷³ The same was true of the moral values expressed in the tales (for example their lack of any allusion to polygamy) and spiritual values (no mention of reincarnation). He constantly stressed that “*La grande masse se compose de contes dont l'intention est purement morale et dont le sujet est emprunté aux incidents de la vie familière*.”⁷⁴ For Paris, these medieval short tales, being a satirical mirror of French day-to-day life in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, were to provide the foundation for the comic, novelistic genres and satirical plays of the sixteenth century:

⁷¹ Paris, “Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge,” 106.

⁷² Bloch, *The scandal of the fabliaux*, 11–12.

⁷³ Paris, *La littérature française du moyen âge*, 113.

⁷⁴ Paris, “Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge,” 85.

*Une fois l'observation de la vie réelle, la peinture de la société contemporaine, entrées dans les mœurs littéraires, elles n'en sortirent plus: elles se perpétuèrent, avec un art de plus en plus parfait, dans les nouvelles italiennes, tandis qu'en France elles changèrent de forme et s'incarnèrent dans les farces du XVe siècle, préparant ainsi de deux côtés les deux grandes formes de la littérature moderne: la comédie et le roman.*⁷⁵

Paris claimed that the *fabliaux* were the first form of natural texts, texts without complicated metaphors and allegories which might obscure their language and sense. He claimed that the *fabliaux* were written in what Ranke had idealized as “transparent language,” that is, a language in which the meaning of the text was clear, there being no need to “read between the lines.” This concept was appropriated by French scholars in the nineteenth century, referring to the assumption that a text can be seen as a historical source if it is written in transparent language. The *fabliaux*, as natural texts, were not open to interpretation. Rather, they represented the ideal of what Carbonell called the “loquacious primary source,” or the text whose language is clear and whose words mean exactly what they say, so that no further interpretation is necessary.⁷⁶ This idea enjoyed great success in the second half of the nineteenth century, since the main concern of the human scientists was to produce knowledge based on facts, as opposed to interpretation. Michel Bréal, for example, when referring to Sanskrit, pointed out the transparent character of this language, attributing this transparency to its antiquity and to the work of Indian grammarians who, throughout the centuries, had managed to make it gracefully clear.⁷⁷ Max Müller also emphasised the clarity of the ancient languages and the direct association in them between words and their meanings. For Bréal and Müller, as for several other nineteenth-century grammarians, the belief in a transparent language allowed them to compare, analyse and infer characteristics that could be applied to all languages on the Indo-European group. Although this was to become a controversial concept in the twentieth century, with the emergence of the argument of the impossibility of a transparent text, the idea was embraced with fervour by nineteenth-century academics, whose main concern was with the scientific truth of their own statements.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid., 103.

⁷⁶ Carbonell, “L’histoire dite positiviste en France,” 179.

⁷⁷ Bréal, “De la méthode comparative appliquée à l’étude des langues,” 72–5 and “Les progrès de la grammaire comparée,” 161–5.

⁷⁸ See White, *Metahistory*, 2–3.

That Paris believed that the *fabliaux* were written in transparent language can be inferred from many of his comments on the characteristics of those texts.⁷⁹ As noted above, Paris believed that these tales were an accurate reflection of medieval social reality, moral values and attitude towards religion.⁸⁰ He did not assume for one moment that the authors of the comic tales might be presenting a criticism of these values. In his constant quest for objectivity, Paris failed to realise that medieval writers themselves were not objective, and that his own rejection of subjectivity was not typical of all periods in the history of France.

In summary, Paris's textual analysis of the *fabliaux* involved several elements of a scientific-positivistic methodology. However, Paris's own arguments and attempt to provide a system capable of explaining the *fabliaux* put his own method and theory in a difficult position. Paris, like most late nineteenth-century philologists, worshipped science and the methods employed to produce it. Yet, despite his own explicit intentions, Paris's work showed that there was either something erroneous about the methods employed or about the principle behind the scientific knowledge itself. His work thus came to have a central position in the debate about the use of positivism in human sciences in the early twentieth century. It is to the beginnings of this debate that we now turn.

Bédier's Critique of Gaston Paris's Orientalism

As I have said above, Joseph Bédier was both Gaston Paris's most famous student and his greatest critic. He was responsible for the most authoritative refutation of Paris's arguments in several fields of medieval studies (in fact, he made his career out of refuting all of Paris's major theories). Gaston Paris's approach to the *fabliaux* was the first round in the constant debates that pitted Bédier against Paris during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Bédier's criticism of Paris's theories about the *fabliaux* followed the internal logic and the chronological order of Paris's own texts on the subject. In most of the 100 pages of his doctoral thesis, Bédier attempted to prove Gaston Paris's theories false regarding the Indian origins of French short tales by attacking Paris's oriental system, the concept of oral transmission, and the premise of the necessary intermediaries between cultures. In *Les fabliaux*, Bédier's critique ranged from Paris's most general text on the origins of the *fabliaux* (1874) to his

⁷⁹ See, for example, Paris, "Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge," 102–6.

⁸⁰ Paris, *La littérature française du moyen âge*, 116.

articles on specific short tales. Bédier sought to reject Paris's ideas on the plot elements that, until then, had permitted the tales to be seen as of Indian origin.

In his classic work on the *fabliaux*, Nykrog claimed that Paris's contemporaries did not unanimously accept his account of the oriental origins of French comic tales. Indeed, according to Nykrog, Paris's claims were not taken seriously, since few of the later works on the *fabliaux* even bothered to refer to Paris's theories. Nykrog's point is that Bédier's critique of Paris's hypothesis was a unique answer to Gaston Paris's ideas, ideas that did not have any impact on the Parisian academia.⁸¹ Yet, a study of Paris's printed texts in *Romania* between 1875 and 1902, and the responses they drew in terms of articles or monographs, suggests that Nykrog's opinion is actually questionable. In fact, late nineteenth-century scholars did see Orientalism as an essential topic in the study of the *fabliaux*. Bédier was certainly original in his attempt to criticise and refute Paris's oriental theory.

Joseph Bédier's first academic work was thus an attempt to refute the very foundations of Paris's oriental system. He analysed the contribution of nineteenth-century theories to the study of the *fabliaux*, such as Indo-Europeanism and Orientalism. For him, none of them was capable of explaining satisfactorily how the French short tales, which he called *contes à rire*, could have been created anywhere else but in France:

*Avoit-on le droit de laisser faire la théorie orientaliste quand elle ne vous embarrassait pas, de passer outre en cas contraire? A voir la gêne manifeste des chefs de l'école anthropologique, comme M. Andrew Lang, toutes les fois qu'ils se heurtaient aux théoristes indianistes, il était évident que ni les mythologues, ni les anthropologistes n'avaient rien qui les concernât dans des contes venus de l'Inde et parvenus en Europe seulement aux environs des Croisades. Il fallait donc, semblait-il, se méfier de ces mirages: de ces deux systèmes, l'un était chenu et caduc; l'autre, mort-né.*⁸²

Unlike his contemporaries, Bédier was opposed to the very idea of a positivistic system, like the oriental one, being used to classify texts. For him, any such system would inevitably fail because it attempted to bring together too much, to explain things that could not be brought together. "Comme les gouvernements," he argued, "les systèmes périssent par l'exagération de leur principe."⁸³ It was therefore necessary to criticise the

⁸¹ Nykrog, *Les fabliaux*, xxviii–xxxv.

⁸² Bédier, *Les fabliaux*, 6.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 6.

principle underlying each system, because, although these systems seemed to be solid edifices, in most cases, they were fragile and easy to demolish. The failure of Orientalism was, Bédier argued, a case of the general failure of systems. An enthusiastic revisionist, Bédier was also against the deductive method which Paris had applied, as he claimed that through that method, one could not but reaffirm one's own pre-existing hypotheses.

How did Bédier attack Paris's hypotheses about the *fabliaux*? First, Bédier dealt with the origins of Paris's ideas. He identified Loiseleur-Deslongchamps as the first scholar to have applied the oriental doctrine to the *fabliaux*. According to Loiseleur-Deslongchamps, one should "*suivre, à la piste, un conte populaire*."⁸⁴ Going from age to age, from geographic area to geographic area, one should follow this tale back to its original Sanskrit version. "*Arrivé là, il faut s'arrêter*."⁸⁵ Bédier certainly did not mean to prove that the Orientalists were wrong in assuming that India produced a number of comic tales. However, he denied to India the role of "*le réservoir, la source, la matrice, le foyer, la patrie des contes*."⁸⁶ For Bédier, no one had convincing evidence that India had somehow produced all satirical tales known to Europeans, and he suggested that it was unlikely that anyone would ever find such evidence. India had produced tales, Persia had produced tales, tales had been produced in many areas of the globe, but these tales did not tend to migrate from one region to another. If the *fabliaux* appeared in France, then it was only logical that the French themselves had produced the *fabliaux*.

Bédier's argument in the first part of his book is that "*l'histoire ne nous permet pas de supposer qu'il ait existé un peuple privilégié, ayant reçu la mission d'inventer les contes dont devait à perpétuité s'amuser l'humanité future*."⁸⁷ He denied that any of the *fabliaux* showed any evidence of an original Indian tale. The French tales never mentioned the Orient, they did not present exotic aspects and the names of characters did not match any characters from Indian tales: "*L'imagination populaire est logique et non archéologique. Elle se soucie peu de la couleur locale; elle*

⁸⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁷ Bédier's criticism of the oriental theory is also found in Petit de Julleville's work on the history of French literature. Gaston Paris commented on his ideas briefly in an article published in *Romania*, but he dismissed Bédier's comments on the impossibility of the oriental system and turned his attention to other students who corroborated his system. See Bédier, *Les fabliaux*, 15.

a seulement retenu ceci des contes, dépouillés de leur signification morale, qu'i's étaient amusants."⁸⁸

Bédier claimed that the Orientalists had put forward huge claims on the basis of very little actual evidence: "*La question de l'origine des contes est, comme toute question historique, non pas précisément 'une question de fait' mais 'une question d'interprétation des faits'.*"⁸⁹ Rejecting the basic assumptions of the positivistic approach to history and literature, Bédier put forward the idea, extremely original at the time, that there is no truth in historical and literary research. By doing this, he reduced every aspect of a historian's job simply to the interpretation of facts. Interpreting facts was, for Bédier, just as good as actual facts because, in his opinion, no historian or literary critic could effectively do anything else. Interpretations were not truthful; nothing in human sciences, in his opinion, was ever truthful. Nevertheless, some interpretations carried scientific value because they were relatively better than other interpretations, that is, they were based on the evidence available to the scientist. Bédier went further still, predicting that his own ideas were likely to be considered outdated by future academics, as his ideas were interpretations of sources, and not by any means capable of exhausting the sources and/or finding historical truth.

As we have seen, crucial to Gaston Paris's claim of an Indian source for the comic tales was the need to find an appropriate series of intermediaries who had transmitted the texts from their original written source into an oral version and then to the written tales called *fabliaux*. Bédier therefore concentrated his efforts on attacking what he called the "intermediary theory," starting with the theory as it appeared in Paris's own analysis:

*Le système était assuré, semblait-il. Il n'y avait plus qu'à refaire, après tant de savants, le prestigieux voyage d'Orient: passer, avec chaque fabliau, d'une taverne de Provins ou d'Arras, où un jongleur l'avait rimé, à Grenade, où quelque Juif espagnol l'avait traduit de l'hébreu en latin; remonter avec lui jusqu'à la cour des kalifes contemporains de Charlemagne; puis, plus haut encore, en Perse, auprès des princes sassanides, pour s'arrêter enfin sur les bords du Gange où un religieux mendiant, prêchant les quatre vérités sublimes, le contait à la foule.*⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Ibid., 157 (emphasis added).

⁸⁹ Ibid., 165.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 4.

Bédier made Orientalists and believers in the oriental system seem rather foolish, implying that they had been deceived by a dreamy analysis of historical literature. A sarcastic man by nature, Bédier meant no disrespect, and even though he clearly stated that Paris's analysis were ludicrous, he did this with Paris's approval. Bédier's viewpoint was based on examining the sources (the *fabliaux* themselves) and an understanding of medieval geography and travels. He argued that Paris's hypothesis was wrong by showing, via inductive methods, how it simply could not have worked. If any text had indeed travelled in the manner suggested by Paris, it would have been an exception, rather than a rule.

Not only was Bédier a critic of the way scientific-positivism had been used in the human sciences, he also proposed another principle in Paris's analysis of the *fabliaux*, which was the argument for realism in historical sciences. This is clear, for example, in his review of Paris's analysis of the *Lai de l'épervier*. For this text, Paris had detailed so many different processes that the original tale had undergone in order to be derived, accommodated and changed into its French version that his theory became easy prey for Bédier. Bédier used the *Lai de l'épervier* and Paris's analysis of it as one of his first case studies against the oriental argument. Bédier argued, against Paris's hypothesis of genealogical trees of medieval texts, that two versions of the same tale could present the same error without being part of the same genealogical branch, an idea that he would use again in his later texts on the *Lai de l'ombre*.⁹¹ This *lai* told the story of a knight who, having fallen in love with a married lady, could not express his feelings for her because speaking to her would imply desecrating her. As a result, the knight slips a ring into her finger. When his beloved realises this, she tells the knight that she cannot keep the ring, but as he protests, they decide that she will return the ring and that the knight will be free to do with it as he wishes. He then drops the ring into the well where they both had been sitting, thus "giving" the ring to the lady's reflection and avoiding offending her in the process.

This story had numerous variations, which was part of the problem with Gaston Paris's use of the tale in his theories. How to ascertain which was the line of transmission from the oldest version to the most recent one, when one was faced with such a large number of variations (sometimes a dozen per *fabliau*)? Gaston Paris's hypothesis was that if different versions of the same *fabliau* denote the same error or mistake, then they must belong to the same branch in the genealogical tree. Against this, Bédier claimed, as he did again several years later, that copiers' mistakes could

⁹¹ Ibid., 229–30.

happen repeatedly and in the same sentence or word because parts of the text may have been more likely to confuse the scribes than others.⁹² Rejecting Paris's complicated explanation of why many different versions of the same tale existed (the processes of *accommodation*, *dérivation* and *déformation*), Bédier explained that these arose because there was no single common source. For him, each tale was a singular product of a poet's creativity. In addition, Bédier argued that when poets produced the tales in the late Middle Ages, they probably just changed characteristics of the group of texts that each one of them used and that were part of common knowledge. Bédier thus asserted that texts tended to repeat themselves because there are only so many themes they could follow. While rejecting the main points of Gaston Paris's oriental theory, Bédier accepted that India had produced a large series of texts such as *Les mille et une nuits*, which still entertained humankind. However, in his opinion, the *fabliaux* were an original French product, being the literary manifestation of the new social structure that came into being with the development of a bourgeoisie.⁹³

If Bédier was the first to deny Paris's oriental theory, he did preserve some of the particular elements of Paris's analysis of the *fabliaux*. For example, he never attacked the principle of the transparency of the text, the "historical mimetism" of the *fabliaux*, which meant that there was no need for their interpretation.⁹⁴ On the contrary, Bédier himself adopted this principle, as did most of his successors in this field: "*pour la peinture réaliste des types et des mœurs, pour la vérité de l'observation cruelle, ils paraissent avoir atteint du premier coup le genre spécial de perfection qu'ils recherchent.*"⁹⁵ He believed that the *fabliaux* had been produced to entertain the bourgeoisie, and the poets derived a particular pleasure from the observation of everyday life that the bourgeoisie must have enjoyed.⁹⁶ Bloch argued that this wish to relate the *fabliaux* to the reality of the period to which they refer was one of the foundations of naturalism in historical and philological studies. Representing what Bloch called "poetry without poetics," the *fabliaux* went beyond any possibility of metaphysical or romantic interpretation and thus set literary studies among the precise sciences.⁹⁷ Although Bédier did apply this naturalistic theory to the *fabliaux*, he should not have done so, given that he was astute enough to

⁹² Ibid., 232.

⁹³ Ibid., 371–5.

⁹⁴ Bloch, "Naturalisme, nationalisme, médiévisme," 64.

⁹⁵ Bédier, "Le fabliau de Richeu," 25.

⁹⁶ Bédier, "Les fabliaux," II, 62.

⁹⁷ Bloch, "Naturalisme, nationalisme, médiévisme," 68.

realise that there are no facts in human sciences, there are only interpretations of facts.

One can understand why Gaston Paris, who saw himself as a positivistic scientist, defended the principle of realism in the narrative of the *fabliaux*. As Nykrog suggested, Paris drew attention to the desire for truth in thirteenth-century France, as anticipating what was happening in the late nineteenth century, that is, the unification of France under a positive science and knowledge.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, it is less easy to understand why most authors who studied the *fabliaux* since then, including Bédier, should have seen the *fabliaux* as mirroring the reality of their time. Modern scholars of course claim that no literary genre can objectively represent reality.⁹⁹ I leave this debate to literary critics. What is interesting to note is that in his study of the *fabliaux*, Paris lapsed into romantic considerations about the transmission of tales, whereas Bédier ended up lapsing into scientific-positivism just to prove that Paris's supposed positivism did not work.

Unlike Paris, Bédier was not concerned with a search for the origins of the *fabliaux*; he did not even think they were worth looking for. His position was quite unusual in the late nineteenth century, when most academics were still attached to the idea of finding an archetypal text and its various versions. Besides, for Bédier, the importance of the comparative method in researching literature was not the same as for Gaston Paris. For Paris, it was necessary to compare texts in order to find the oldest version, eliminating the elements that must have been inserted in later periods of history and that could not have been part of the original version. For Bédier, on the other hand, the reason why one should compare texts is to understand more about history and culture since, in his opinion, any variation had the same value as the original, and how the

⁹⁸ Nykrog, *Les fabliaux*, xxv.

⁹⁹ Bloch, *The scandal of the fabliaux*, 12–13. The list of authors who devoted themselves to the study of the *fabliaux* is long, almost as long as the list of those who considered the *fabliaux* transparent texts. Jean Rychner and Philippe Ménard are examples of that line of thought. However discussing the validity of considering the *fabliaux* as a genre designed for a specific public in the Middle Ages (basically denying both Bédier's and Nykrog's hypotheses), they failed to ask themselves about the truthfulness of the texts, when they claim that "*Quand l'auteur du Villain au buffet note que le rustre a les mains calleuses ... il n'invente rien*" (see Ménard, *Les fabliaux*, 53). Claiming that "*les situations parlent d'elles-mêmes*," Ménard is interested in a history of laughter, ignoring that some jokes and episodes in the *fabliaux* could have been inserted exactly for that purpose, not being related to any historical or actual episode. This point was emphasized by Bloch in *The scandal of the fabliaux*.

tales were transmitted was not an important issue. Bédier's argument was particularly convincing as applied to the Middle Ages, for he considered that texts in this period were actually intended to be copied and revised.

Although Bédier's doctoral thesis of 1893 undermined Paris's theories on the origins of the *fabliaux*, some writers continued to accept and use the theory of their oriental origins. Paris himself responded to Bédier by reaffirming his own oriental ideas. He particularly insisted on Bédier's barbarism in calling the *fableaux* by the name of *fabliaux*, implying that Bédier's views on those tales was not an academic and scientific one, but merely an attempt to popularise the short tales by saying that they were French and thus making them closer to the French heart. Even a decade after Bédier's initial attack, Paris was still concerned with challenging Bédier's ideas. That was the aim of his last article on the *fabliaux*, which was published in *Romania* in 1902, a year before his death. In this article, which focused on the *fabliau* of the *Trois Bossus Ménestrels*, Paris claimed that the German scholar Alfred Pillet had, despite Bédier's work, managed to find evidence in support of the oriental theory.¹⁰⁰ For Paris, Pillet's analysis of Durand's *Trois Bossus* was a corroboration of the oriental system, since Pillet had argued that the *bossus* in this tale (dancers and musicians) were characters commonly present in Indian tales, although they had not actually existed in France itself.¹⁰¹ For Paris, this was enough to prove the impossibility of such a tale having been originally created by the French (maybe because of the widespread belief that the French cannot dance).

Paris faced a further problem in his analysis of the tale of the *Trois Bossus*. As discussed earlier, the tale told the story of three musicians who were hired to amuse a lady, but were later found dead in suspicious circumstances. Paris realised that for his argument about the transmission of the tale to make sense, there must have been two coexisting original versions of the tale in India, one in which the lady's lovers had been killed by the lady's husband alone and one in which they had been killed by the lady with or without her husband's participation. Paris argued that these tales gave rise, in Europe, to other plots, such as the one in which the lovers died by accident (Italian fable) and the one in which the lovers died by accident and so did the lady's husband, who bore a resemblance to one of the musicians (Keller's version).¹⁰² For him, the theme behind the earliest European originals must have been the same. However, in Paris's view, after he had produced his analysis of the genealogical tree which he

¹⁰⁰ Paris, "Das Fableau von den Trois Bossus Ménestrels," 136.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁰² Bédier, *Les fabliaux*, p. 245.

had built for the original tale and its European branches, the first original produced in Europe had to have been written by two different authors, and was therefore not *one* original, but *two* texts written roughly around the same time:

*Il est très intéressant de trouver à la fois en Extrême-Orient et en Europe cette forme parallèle du thème qui nous occupe: c'est un cas où se vérifie l'opinion, souvent exprimée par M. Cosquin, d'après laquelle, dans les contes européens, venus de l'Inde, il n'est guère de variante qui ne se retrouve dans leur patrie d'origine. Il semble bien qu'il ait existé dans l'Inde deux formes d'un même thème.*¹⁰³

Satisfied with his own analysis and regretting his former student's rejection of his oriental theory, Paris wondered if monographs like Bédier's, which rejected the search for the origins of the tales, could contribute much to the history of literature and philological studies. He then expressed his admiration for Pillet's studies, since he argued that

*Les monographies critiques de contes répandus au moyen âge peuvent être recommandées à la fois comme très utiles à l'histoire littéraire et à la mythographie et comme formant un excellent test des connaissances, des aptitudes et de la méthode d'un jeune philologue.*¹⁰⁴

In conclusion, it must be said that Paris never spent too long on any specific subject, and that he only wrote 13 texts on the *fabliaux* (out of more than 1,000 articles and reviews he wrote during his career). His observations were imprecise and markedly intended as non-polemical. He was mainly a populariser of medieval topics, not among the public, which would be a romantic approach to medieval studies, and one which Gaston Paris did not support, but among other academics. His interest in a topic immediately yielded more interest from others, and it is as such that his contribution to the development of medievalism in the late nineteenth century should be judged.

Using description and narrative to introduce the *fabliaux*, Paris indulged his (perhaps to be called romantic) preferences for reconstructing history by making it aesthetically appealing (showing positive and negative elements of the oriental texts). Paris's analysis of the *Trois Bossus* is a good example of his method of offering a positive analysis of comparative literature while, despite himself, combining it with elements that did not fall into the scientific (inductive) method of

¹⁰³ Paris, "Das Fableau von den Trois Bossus Ménestrels," 140.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 136 (emphasis in original).

philological/linguistic analysis. Paris's argument was comprehensive in the sense that even if something did not fit into the original argument, he created another ad hoc element that would make it possible. Yet, as Bédier said, in building a huge system capable of embracing all possible versions of a text, Paris ended up with a fragile house of cards, one which laid itself open to criticism on what Bédier called "the grounds of common sense."

Paris's arguments were hypothetical and impossible to prove, as there was no actual evidence to support them. For Bédier, Paris seemed to have been so keen on the oriental system that he had lost the ability to understand human behaviour.¹⁰⁵ For example, if these tales had been so important, how could they have been unknown between ancient Greece and the Crusades?¹⁰⁶ How could they have been transmitted all the way from India through Persia, Constantinople and arrive in France looking exactly like French texts? Bédier also claimed that Paris's complicated transmissions, variations and derivations were not possible. Paris could not see that the transmission of the tales which he had imagined was not likely to have happened, and was simply a product of his own imagination, there being no evidence to support his theory.¹⁰⁷ Bédier's contribution was important to the next generations of medievalists because his work, despite his own intentions, showed the limits of positivistic systems, where what was supposed to be science becomes an illusion, and where textual analysis began to be independent of the search for origins. Bédier attacked both the romantic and the scientific basis of Paris's analyses, making it hard for academics to use Paris's work after the early 1900s. For Bédier and the later generations, romanticism did not have a place in literary and textual criticism, while positivistic systems were not considered capable of producing scientific knowledge.

In summary, philology and medievalism in the late nineteenth-century were awakened because of positivistic methods, as seen in the case of nineteenth-century studies of the *fabliaux*. In Indo-European studies, such as those of Bréal and Müller, and in the study of the medieval *fabliaux*, as seen in Paris's work, one can find the roots of French expansionism and the scientific basis behind Orientalism in the modern sense. Late nineteenth-century medievalism was, as most fields of the natural and historical sciences, used for purposes that were not strictly academic, having political repercussions, although these academic discourses were supposedly based on the impartiality of all scientific disciplines. As I shall

¹⁰⁵ Bédier, *Les fabliaux*, 15.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

show in Chapter Four, Paris's analysis of the Arthurian tales was also explicitly based on a scientific-positivistic methodology, one committed to the non-subjective character of historical and literary analysis. However, as we shall see, Paris was not always true to his own theory, lapsing once more into subjectivism and romanticism.

CHAPTER FOUR

GASTON PARIS AND HISTORY: ARTHURIAN TALES AND THE ANTI-NATIONAL MYTHS

*Les romans bretons sont le produit du contact de la société française et des Celtes.*¹

In his work on Arthurian literature, as in his studies of the epic and the *fabliaux*, Gaston Paris was keen to use scientific-positivistic methods in order to ensure the truthfulness of the historical and philological analysis and to bring scientific greatness to France. He claimed to be restricting himself to a positivistic textual analysis (that is, philological issues regarding the origin, date and variations of medieval manuscripts), leaving literary criticism, viewed as the instrument of romantic scholars, aside.

In this final chapter, I will endeavour to show that Paris indeed found a scientific-positivistic methodology useful in solving problems relating to the origin and diffusion of Arthurian stories, which was a common concern of philologists at the time. Nevertheless, in spite of his own claims, in practice, Paris effectively produced what can only be called “literary criticism” of Arthurian tales, as he often abandoned strict textual criticism and his own allegedly positivistic approach. Once again, we see a contradiction between what Paris said he was doing and what he actually did. If it is true, as Cerquiglini and Aarsleff claimed, that Paris’s work was characterised by “reconciliation between romanticism and positivism,” it is also true that Paris himself did not consciously intend to combine these two methodologies.² Reconciliation implies that Paris was willing to combine positivism and romanticism in his work, whereas nothing could be further from the truth. If Paris allowed his methodology to float between the workings of a romantic epistemology and those of a

¹ Paris, “Études sur les romans de la Table Ronde,” 466.

² See Cerquiglini, *Éloge de la variante*, 73–80; Aarsleff, “Scholarship and ideology,” 94–5.

positivistic one, he did so because he was unable to resolve all the issues that he addressed by using the scientific tools applicable to philology and textual criticism alone. When he approached medieval texts, Paris asked questions that positivist textual criticism alone could not answer. His emphasis on positivism as a means to achieve a “true” analysis of the texts of the Arthurian cycle was not followed by much success in actually using the method which he himself had advocated.³

Even when Paris shifted from a strict positivistic and philological analysis of the Arthurian tales, he still did not openly adopt a romantic approach and continued to emphasise the scientific character of his research. Yet most of the time, Paris’s articles did little more than retell Arthurian tales and speculate about their components instead of approaching the tales analytically. He did this because he thought that it was important that his readers should become acquainted with the Arthurian poems, which constituted a huge literature scattered across four centuries. However, in doing so, he was acting in a manner reminiscent of his father, Paulin Paris, and others of his generation, whose main purpose was to popularise texts, rather than to approach them analytically. As we have seen, this is a point that would easily have placed Gaston Paris within the definition of “romantic scholar” which was current in his own time.

Paris began studying the Arthurian tales in the 1880s. Although Arthurian romances were seen as widely popular in the Middle Ages, scholars could not easily identify what was the basis of their appeal. This subject concerns us here because it reveals a side of French nationalism that was unique. As seen in previous chapters, through the study of the epic, one becomes acquainted with Franco-Germanic relations in the nineteenth century, and through the *fabliaux*, one can ascertain how France understood the Orient and used it to reaffirm her own values. In the study of Arthurian tales, one can see two further aspects of French nationalism: first, French regional (or provincial) nationalism, and second, French morality in relation to the Arthurian tales. Regional nationalism, as we will see, provided the earliest explanations of the popularity of Arthurian tales and raised several questions that are still relevant to modern analyses of these tales. The second aspect of Arthurian studies, relating to French ethics and morals, is one which associated some tales of the Arthurian cycle (most notably *Tristan et Iseut*) with a lack of morality. This led to a re-evaluation of what was to be seen as part of national literature and what was not, and why.

³ See, for example, Paris, “Tristan et Iseult, Poème de Gotfrid de Strasbourg, par A. Bossert,” 56–8; Paris, “L’esprit normand en Angleterre,” 45–74; Paris, “Études sur les romans de la Table Ronde,” 465–96.

The crucial point here is that while late nineteenth-century historians used early nineteenth-century historical and literary studies of Arthurian tales, the reasons why they were studying them and the conclusions at which they arrived were different from those of their predecessors. Twentieth-century medievalism and, more recently, North American new medievalism have, in turn, inherited some of the debate late nineteenth-century historiography, textual and literary criticism. Although scholarly methods have changed, ideas produced in the nineteenth century remain influential in Arthurian studies, creating a tension within academic studies of the Middle Ages, particularly in the field of new medievalism.

Nationalism and the Study of the Arthurian Cycle

In the early nineteenth century, and largely as a response to the 1789 revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Napoleonic Empire, a form of nationalism emerged in the French provinces opposing the then widespread values of cosmopolitanism. "Provincial nationalism," as scholars call it, was a phenomenon of the period 1830–60, when scholars in different parts of the country approached literature and history to try and link the regional to the national. This effort was largely discarded after 1860, when the project of nationalisation emerged in academia as well as government as necessary to unite France. Nonetheless, it was the effort of a few notable provincial nationalists that brought the study of the Arthurian cycle to an elevated position, first among French *littérateurs*, and then among academics.

In the 1830s, as we saw in Chapter Two, a new generation of scholars started investigating the work of a previous generation and rejected it due to its unscientific character. Something similar happened to early nineteenth-century studies of the Arthurian tales. In the 1830s, the so-called antiquarian school, as represented by La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, was being superseded as a model of study and replaced by another,⁴ which scholars at the time considered to be more scientific.⁵ In the early 1830s,

⁴ La Curne de Sainte-Palaye's interest in historical studies was based on his many projects of writing historical dictionaries and grammars of the French language (Keller, *The Middle Ages reconsidered*, 10–11). Doolittle and others referred to him as an "antiquarian" because, like many of his time, his interest lay in cultural history, but he developed no particular methodology for dealing with it (see Doolittle, *The relations between literature and mediaeval studies in France from 1820 to 1860*, 3–4).

⁵ The "scientific" basis of literary studies in the 1830s was, as seen in Chapter Two, quite different from that of studies after 1860. Especially in what concerned

Claude Fauriel started studying the roots of Arthurian poems, trying to prove their continental Celtic origin. At the time, the only way to identify a text's origins was by speculating about the provenance of ancient *trouvères*, *troubadours* and bards. By discovering from where the troubadours had come, Fauriel thought it would be possible to infer where the texts had come from, what caused them to disappear and what role they had in the spread of medieval texts. This method was not based on philology, but rather on a historiocultural approach to the problem of origins.⁶ As we will see, this changed in the 1860s, as Gaston Paris and his colleagues developed different methods to examine the problems posed by the tales of the Arthurian cycle. In order to assess the contribution of Paris's work to Arthurian studies, I will begin with an assessment of the works of the four scholars who most influenced him, namely Fauriel, La Villemarqué, Paulin Paris and Renan, in order to discover what Paris took from their work and how far he succeeded in steering Arthurian studies in a new direction.

Two Approaches to Arthurian Tales: Fauriel and La Villemarqué

Une épopée appartient en propre au pays qui l'a produite: elle est française, italienne, allemande, mais non européenne. Elle ne peut se traduire, à moins de changer de nature et de devenir un simple conte, de chant national qu'elle était. ... Les poèmes chevaleresques ... appartiennent, du reste, à un temps où le sentiment national lui-même était peu énergique, où le château remplaçait la cité et faisait oublier la patrie.⁷

In the early nineteenth century, a challenge presented itself to French government: while some people saw France as a nation that was politically

the popularisation of medieval studies after 1870, one can see a distinct emphasis on scientism and scientific studies after 1870. Whereas attempts to popularise medieval studies in the 1860s had been restricted to the efforts of Meyer and Paris, in the 1870s to the 1890s, such efforts became generalised. The Middle Ages had indeed become the national muse, and its study would remain part of French culture even after Bédier's wide-ranging criticism of current literary theories and Paris's theories on medieval literature and literary criticism itself.

⁶ See Bloch, "842: The first document and the birth of medieval studies," 10–12; Gumbrecht, "Un souffle d'Allemagne ayant passé," 23–7; Doolittle, *The relations between literature and mediaeval studies in France from 1820 to 1860*, 7–52; Keller, *The Middle Ages reconsidered*, especially 85–141; Glencross, *Reconstructing Camelot*, 85–8.

⁷ Bossert, *Tristan et Iseult*, 5.

unified but culturally and socially fragmented, others resisted the very idea of a national unity of France. The division between different regions of the country, such as the Midi, the southern and northern provinces (which were also divided internally) was a problem for the ideal of a unified nation.⁸ The question of which region of France was the most important in the formation and development of a national feeling was being hotly debated. This opposition between Provence and the Midi, Brittany and Normandy, was not only relevant in terms of social and political issues between the regions, but also came to be reflected in medieval studies.

Littérateurs and antiquarians in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries divided themselves into two groups. The first comprised provincial scholars who did not accept the idea that the nation was more important than provincial identities. They claimed the cultural superiority of one region (normally their own) over the others. The second group was opposed to the idea of provincial nationalism, seeing it as being contrary to the concept of a national state, which government and educational institutions were so eager to create.

The first group of prominent provincial medievalists based itself on the work of Jean Papon, who had studied Guillaume Massieu's texts (1739) on the history of the literature of southern France. Papon's work on medieval French literature in the south of France, published in 1777, was important because it was the first attempt to assess this literature and emphasise its value for the whole body of national literature. Another representative of this group was Legrand d'Aussy (1779), who, as we saw in Chapter Three, was responsible for the first comprehensive study of the *fabliaux*. Legrand d'Aussy disliked troubadour poems immensely, and emphasised the importance of other French literary genres, such as the *fabliaux*, which did not come from the south of France. The *nationalisme occitan*, revived by numerous studies on the Albigensian Crusade, such as Claude Fauriel's *Chanson de la Croisade* (1837), showed how potentially difficult it would be to incorporate the inhabitants of Languedoc in the national unity of France in the nineteenth century, as Fauriel expressed, heatedly:⁹

La monstrueuse guerre des Albigeois, qui détruisit la civilisation du Midi, porta aussi un coup mortel à sa littérature. La domination française s'étant établie dans le pays, les classes élevées s'y trouvèrent bientôt dans la nécessité d'adopter le français pour langue: le provençal, l'idiome des troubadours, idiome très-délicat, et du système grammatical le plus raffiné,

⁸ See Glencross, *Reconstructing Camelot*, 119–25.

⁹ Amalvi, *Le goût du moyen âge*, 173–5.

*cessa d'être cultivé, d'être une langue écrite; il reste l'idiome des masses, dans la bouche desquelles il devait se corrompre et se dénaturer de plus en plus.*¹⁰

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the division between north and south had become less important, partly because of the success of the government's effort to unify France. Yet there were scholars like Fauriel who remained loyal to an analysis of medieval literature in regional terms, even if most scholars were now seeking to offer a comprehensive analysis of all French literature in a particular historical period.¹¹ The generation of the 1830s was not only abandoning provincial nationalism, but also distancing itself from the exaggerated influence of antiquarianism that, as seen above, was also characteristic of late eighteenth-century medieval studies.

Sticking to a provincial analysis of medieval literature, Fauriel emphasised the role of Provençal *trouvères* in the creation of Carolingian and Arthurian epics of the Middle Ages, contrary to the traditional hypothesis which had claimed that they originated in west-Brittany. Fauriel claimed that the original source of the Arthurian stories might well have been the *Bretagne armoricaine*, where the Bretons, descendants of the Celts, created Arthurian tales. However, he affirmed that there was no proof of this, and put forward an alternative hypothesis:

*On a signalé souvent la Bretagne armoricaine, comme le foyer des traditions qui ont servi de base aux romans de chevalerie en général et particulièrement à ceux de la Table ronde. ... Dans le peu que l'on sait de la culture poétique et sociale des Bretons armoricains au moyen âge et dans les temps plus modernes, il n'y a pas un trait qui ne pût, au besoin, servir à prouver que le germe de compositions telles que les romans épiques de la Table ronde n'a jamais existé ni pu exister en Bretagne. ... Dans l'état actuel de la critique historique, de telles assertions doivent tomber d'elles-mêmes et ne peuvent plus se reproduire.*¹²

Essentially, it did not matter to Fauriel where the stories had originated from, because, in his opinion, they had passed through oral tradition to the south, where Provençal poets had put them into written form.¹³ For

¹⁰ Fauriel, "Origine de l'épopée chevaleresque du moyen âge," 149.

¹¹ For example, Ampère was responsible for texts that attempted to offer a full assessment of French literature from its origins (eighth century) to the present (Ampère, "Vue générale de la littérature française au moyen âge," 179–93).

¹² Fauriel, "Origine de l'épopée chevaleresque du moyen âge," VII, 673–4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, VIII, 138–9.

Fauriel, the oral form of a poem or story was always superior to its written one, because a culture would only put its traditional tales into written form when threatened by some external group, in which case the danger of invasion made it imperative to write down the oral tradition in order to preserve it.¹⁴ Thus, in Fauriel's opinion, the initial origin of the Arthurian poems was conceivably Brittany, where the Continental Celts had lived for centuries; from there the stories were transmitted further south to the inhabitants of Provence and the *troubadours*. Therefore, Arthurian literature fell into the category of foreign literature, because it was indeed foreign to the *trouvères* who first wrote it down, which is how he justified teaching the Arthurian cycle in a course at the Faculté des Lettres de Paris which focused on the rapport between French and foreign literature. Carolingian epics, on the other hand, were to be seen as truly French, the earliest product of French national literature. However, in Fauriel's view, it was the Arthurian epics which become more popular, perhaps because they were nationless, allowing every European nation to adopt them and transmit them as part of their own national literature.¹⁵ For Fauriel, the national character who best symbolised French nationality was not Arthur, but Charlemagne. He saw the Arthurian cycle as a refuge where medieval people could relax, where they let their imaginations fly to distant Celtic lands. Regarding the epic, on the other hand, he claimed that peasants and nobles had sung the epic songs on their way to the battlefield in order to build up the national spirit.

The problem with Fauriel's analysis, one that was common to most scholars of his generation and which Gaston Paris and his colleagues often pointed out, was that it lacked any supporting evidence. While the claim that Arthurian tales were of Provençal origin was valid, the way Fauriel sought to prove his assumption was not the best by any scientific standards (modern or late-nineteenth-century alike). At the time, of course, Fauriel was not bound by scientific standards, and the way he presented his argument was quite puzzling indeed. As a result, his writings did not stand well the test of time, and as soon as the wave of scientificism and emphasis on philology became widespread in the 1860s, the work of Fauriel and his colleagues became the subject of easy criticism.

There was a second group of scholars who rejected provincial nationalism in academic studies. Of these, one of the most extreme was Hersart de La Villemarqué (1815–96). A famous French poet, his studies of medieval literature, especially on the Arthurian cycle, were influential

¹⁴ Glencross, *Reconstructing Camelot*, 112.

¹⁵ Fauriel, "Origine de l'épopée chevaleresque du moyen âge," VIII, 174–5.

because they offered ideas which differed from Fauriel's on the origin of Arthurian tales, and provided a method for analysing those texts. La Villemarqué claimed that the Arthurian cycle, which he called the "*cycle breton*" had a Celtic origin, and that it had been developed and created by inhabitants of Brittany, who travelled to and from Wales during the early Middle Ages, transmitting their own oral traditions. For Fauriel, as we have seen, the Arthurian tales were foreign because of their Celtic origin, although they were written in French. However, Fauriel did emphasise the role of the French in making the legends eternal. For Villemarqué, on the other hand, the French invented the Arthurian legends, but they transmitted them to the Welsh, and it was the Welsh who had made them eternal by compiling the Arthurian stories into the *Mabinogion*.

Villemarqué, like Fauriel before him, was interested in popular culture, claiming that the French were the receptacle of traditions from abroad which had been adapted and orally transmitted through generations of Frenchmen. For both Villemarqué and Fauriel, one of the most important aspects of Arthurian studies was that they allowed scholars to understand the relationship between popular and savant culture in the Middle Ages. Yet, like most romantic scholars who were as concerned with the problem of popular culture as national identity, Villemarqué's analyses were rather superficial. There are two possible reasons for this: first, because material on the subject was scarce; second, because Villemarqué did not have an extensive knowledge of Welsh, which was the language of the *Mabinogion*. As we will see, the distinction between popular and savant culture would almost disappear in Gaston Paris's generation, but it would become important again in Bédier's work.

Two Approaches to Arthurian Tales: Paulin Paris and Renan

Most of the problems that the early nineteenth-century scholars encountered in their studies of medieval literature and the questions they raised were also apparent in the writings of later generations. As we have seen, one of the romantic scholars usually seen as having pioneered medieval studies in France was Gaston's father, Paulin Paris. His view of medieval French literature was much less "regional" than those of Fauriel and Villemarqué. Paris did not share Fauriel's view that it was important to determine whether or not the epics (Arthurian and Carolingian) had originated in Brittany or Provence, and under which form (oral or written). Paulin Paris claimed that whatever their origin, what was important about the Arthurian tales was their role in the formation of a French national culture:

*Étudier les Romans de la Table ronde, c'est, d'un côté, suivre le cours des anciennes légendes bretonnes; et, de l'autre, observer les transformations auxquelles ces légendes ont été soumises en pénétrant, pour ainsi dire, la littérature des autres pays.*¹⁶

Paulin Paris played a valuable role in finding and cataloguing Arthurian tales in France. His work on the Royal Library was essential in furnishing Gaston Paris and others of his generation with the twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts which they were to edit and translate.¹⁷ It was Paulin Paris who created the threefold division of medieval literary subjects: *matière de France*, *matière d'Antiquité* and *matière de Bretagne*. For him, the cycle of Arthur was historically truthful, that is, he thought the stories narrated were based on certain historical events. Even if they had become romanticised over time, with the heroes losing their heads over beautiful ladies instead of fighting for their nation or their king, what these tales told were true stories of medieval France.¹⁸

One of the most important of Paulin's theories was his claim that the prose romances had been written before those in poetic form. According to him, Chrétien de Troyes, when writing his poems, had been imitating earlier prose authors. As we will see, Gaston Paris attempted to prove his father wrong on this issue in the first studies he wrote on the Arthurian cycle (1881 and 1883), by engaging in a round of unscientific allegations.

Returning to those who influenced Gaston Paris's views on the Arthurian poems, we must mention Ernest Renan. In 1854, Renan put forward the idea that the Arthurian tales were truly Celtic in origin, coming from Wales, and that these tales had played a decisive role in shaping European culture since the twelfth century:

*Mais que ce soit aux Bretons de France, et non à ceux de Galles, qu'Arthur doive sa transformation poétique; que les mabinogion gallois ne nous représentent que la forme altérée d'une tradition dont la presq'île armoricaine aurait été le berceau, comme le pensent M. de la Villemarqué et quelques autres critiques, c'est là une hypothèse inadmissible pour quiconque a lu sans prétention nationale le beau recueil de lady Charlotte Guest. Tout est gallois dans ces fables: les lieux, la généalogie, les habitudes. ... C'est donc au pays de Galles qu'il faut restituer dans la race celtique l'initiative de la création romanesque.*¹⁹

¹⁶ Paris, P., *Les romans de la Table Ronde mis en nouveau langage*, I, 5.

¹⁷ See Paris, P., *Les manuscrits françois de la Bibliothèque du Roi*.

¹⁸ Glencross, "La matière de Bretagne dans l'érudition française à l'époque Romantique," 97.

¹⁹ Renan, "La poésie des races celtiques," 493–4.

According to Renan, Celtic texts had not only influenced France and England, but every single European nation, and even the rest of the world. These texts were not merely entertaining; they had actually changed European history, in the sense that the serious and brutal Germanic mentality, which had previously had a large influence over Continental Europe, had its influence reduced from the twelfth century, when Celtic tales started being popularised by French troubadours. In Renan's view, these tales made European populations less aggressive and more contemplative, a characteristic that Renan associated with the Celts.

For Renan, the Arthurian tales had originally been so popular because their stories embodied the egalitarian ideal that was to be the aspiration of all modern European nations. For Fauriel, as we have seen, the fact that the Arthurian romances were nationless was a negative aspect; for Renan, on the other hand, it was a positive aspect, one which had been responsible for their spread and their success in establishing, in a fictional way, an ideal of universal historical significance. Of course, the way in which each scholar understood the significance of the Arthurian tales revealed much about their own political convictions and what they expected, in political and social terms, for France. Regardless of this, what is important to note is that as early as 1850, debate about the origin and the relevance of the Arthurian poems was already common currency in academia, as medieval studies flourished and progressively gained more importance in nineteenth-century France.

Gaston Paris was to make use of these earlier analyses not only because they offered important topics to explore, but also because one of his main concerns was with the recent and past history of medievalism in France. He believed that the scientific work of his own generation was breaking with a tradition that had started in the sixteenth century with the antiquarian historians who did not engage in active research, but instead only read modern language translations of medieval texts. In addition, he was conscious of the importance of the debates raised by earlier studies of the Arthurian cycle. In particular, the problem of the cycle's origins was the one which he addressed most energetically. He tried, as he did with the *fabliaux*, to create a system in which he could schematise the origins of Arthurian themes and separate their branches, establishing which came first and which came later, as in his study of *Erec et Enide*:

*Telle me paraît avoir été la donnée du conte celtique qui a pénétré, par les conteurs bretons, dans le monde français; elle y a été transformée de manière à s'accommoder quelque peu à des mœurs moins féroces,*²⁰

²⁰ Paris, "Erec und Enide, par W. Foerster," 165.

and *Tristan et Iseut*:

*Mais bientôt commence dans l'évolution, maintenant purement française, du cycle de Tristan et d'Iseut un double travail de critique et d'innovation, qui tend à en rapprocher de plus en plus les récits des habitudes, des goûts et des mœurs du monde chevaleresque où ils ont pénétré, monde si différent de leur milieu originaire.*²¹

In so doing, Paris relegated to a secondary position other important questions, such as popular versus savant culture and the regionalism of historical and literary analysis which had been so central to the generation of the 1830s. This was not necessarily a negative aspect of his analysis, but it was counter to his own expressed interest in studying French literature as part of an evolving national culture. In focusing merely on the importance of philological questions, Paris forgot the cultural aspect of his studies, becoming embroiled in the search for origins of words and names of places and, ultimately, of poems, rather than attempting to understand their significance for the culture of their own day. As we shall see, Bédier was unforgiving in pointing out this flaw of Paris's work on the Arthurian tales.

As Glencross affirmed, along with the search for the origins of French thinking, one of the most important issues for the generation of romantic medievalists was that of the continuity of French medieval culture over the centuries.²² Scholars' fondness for values such as religious spirituality, whose origins were then traced back to medieval times, and democracy, which was also seen as having its origins in French feudalism, created a special bond between scholars in the early to mid-nineteenth century and what they understood as being part of a French medieval culture. The study of the Middle Ages and medieval thinking was partly a reaction against the extreme rationalism preached in the eighteenth century; it offered a return to other values, ones that were supposedly the foundations of a French way of life which had been forgotten. The idea was to *restore* the true Middle Ages, rather than to *construct* it. Nevertheless, despite this aim, what nineteenth-century scholars actually achieved was the construction of a new Middle Ages, one which inevitably bore the stamp of their own values, questions and answers.²³ In that sense, the questions that scientific-positivistic scholars sought to answer when they assessed medieval texts were not too different from those asked by earlier romantic

²¹ Paris, "Tristan et Iseut," 154.

²² Glencross, *Reconstructing Camelot*, 130.

²³ See Dakyns, *The Middle Ages in French literature*, 291.

scholars. Where they differed was in the method they used and in the answers they offered. The point is that many of the questions raised in the period 1830–90 still shape medieval studies today, which is why it is important to understand how these questions originated, how they were developed and whether they should still be important in today's historiography.

Gaston Paris and the Arthurian Cycle

*L'intérêt de cette étude, si on en accepte les conclusions, est de montrer clairement la pénétration de thèmes purement celtiques – armoricains ou gallois – dans la poésie française du XII^e siècle et de faire entrevoir, par delà cette pénétration, celle de la mythologie irlandaise dans la tradition bretonique. C'est, si je ne me trompe, le double résultat auquel aboutiront de plus en plus sûrement, au moins dans un grand nombre de cas, les recherches sur l'origine et la propagation de la 'matière de Bretagne'.*²⁴

How then did Gaston Paris's approach to the Arthurian poems differ from that of earlier writers? What were the new elements and methods he introduced? What did he retain from previous approaches and analyses? Here, I will attempt to explain briefly Gaston Paris's so-called Celtic theory and his ideas on the spread of Arthurian poems, and analyse their importance both for late nineteenth-century scholarship and modern scholars.

As seen above, the Arthurian cycle was significant to Gaston Paris because it raised crucial questions about French nationality, literature and history. He began studying the Arthurian cycle in the 1880s. By then, he was already a mature scholar, and medieval studies were a fairly well-established discipline within French academia. Paris's work on the epic in the 1860s and 70s had made clear the need to reaffirm French nationality against Germany by using a scientific or positivistic method in medieval studies. Paris's work on the *fabliaux* in the 1870s made evident how French morality influenced his analysis of that particular genre, even though scientific-positivistic scholarship was supposed to be politically unbiased. Through his work on the Arthurian cycle, Paris sought to use scientific-positivism in historical and literary studies by employing philology, which scholars viewed as scientifically guided, rather than resorting to literary criticism, which they viewed as open to subjectivity. If it seemed evident in the study of the *fabliaux* that the problem of origins

²⁴ Paris, "Caradoc et le serpent," 231.

could be dealt with by positivism,²⁵ in terms of Arthurian studies, the quest for the origins was apparently not something that scientific-positivism could answer, as we shall see below.

The Arthurian cycle was the last subject that Paris examined in a systematic form in his academic career. In the late 1870s, following the Franco-Prussian War, scholars had declared their scientific-positivistic views in order to reinforce the value of the output of French academics. By the time that Paris began studying the Arthurian cycle, however, the war and the rivalry with Germany were beginning to be seen as a distant reality. This is one reason why his explicit emphasis on the word “positivism” is less frequent, and his more accurate, methodical and, ultimately, scientific-positivistic analysis of primary texts is much more visible than, for example, in his studies of the *fabliaux*. Furthermore, whereas in his studies of the *fabliaux*, Gaston Paris met with little immediate objection (with the exception of Bédier), when he put forward his theories about the origins of Arthurian tales, he soon found a number of critics who opposed his theories and suggested their own alternative approaches.

It was in his assessment of the Arthurian cycle that Gaston Paris perhaps showed his best qualities as a historian. Whereas in his studies of other literary genres, he did not provide a very satisfactory historical background, when it came to what he called “*matière de Bretagne*,” his main concern was with the contextualisation of the production of this literary cycle in France and Britain. This problem of setting the Arthurian cycle into a historic context was not just based on the need for contextualisation, desirable for any literary genre. The case of Arthurian tales was particularly controversial because no one had any specific evidence as to where the Arthurian legends had originated. The generation of scholars in the last third of the nineteenth century viewed the epics as Germanic in origin, a hypothesis that Paris himself later rejected and Bédier later refuted; Arthurian tales, on the other hand, could potentially have come from a number of European nations, depending on how one analysed them. As we shall see below, if the focus was to be on reception, they could be French, since the French incorporated them into their culture as if they had created them; if the focus was to be on their creation, it made more sense for them to be seen as Celtic, since there were elements in the plot, character names and names of places that were based on Celtic areas. Others claimed that these tales came from Germany, Cornwall, or even Ireland, due to names of places and characters in the plot. Because

²⁵ See Chapter Three.

the earliest known version of Arthurian tales dated only from the twelfth century, although they all mentioned some earlier version from which the poet/author had learned their story, it seemed impossible to find positive evidence of the origins of those tales. Late nineteenth-century scholars did not believe that medieval authors would say that they had “heard the story from someone else” simply in order to make it seem more legitimate or truthful to the public. In the late nineteenth century, scholars assumed that whatever medieval poets said was literally true, which led them to believe that as long as they employed medieval texts as sources, whatever they themselves inferred was also true.

Gaston Paris was well aware of the debates of his father’s generation and the uncertainty about the origins of the Arthurian epics. For him, the Celts of France had created the tales which were then brought to England in the eleventh and twelfth centuries:

*Les saxons étaient séparés des Français, au milieu du XI^e siècle, par un abîme moral plus profond que la mer que séparaient leurs deux pays. Sans organisation politique solide, sans esprit d’initiative, sans commerce, ils menaient une vie simple et grossière, fréquemment troublée par leurs dissensions tumultueuses, ou par le réveil de leurs guerres contre les Danois.*²⁶

It was this idea, that the Saxons pre-1066 existed in a state of political, social and economic chaos, a characteristic they shared with the Celts, that years later would inspire his assessment of *Tristan et Iseut*. Gaston Paris was, like most of his colleagues, an Anglophobe; he saw medieval England as a barbaric wilderness. When writing about the Tristan poems in 1894, he used the passage in which the lovers are described as living alone in the forest in order to argue how this kind of love and the acceptance of this kind of life showed that the poem could not be of French origin because the characters did not show any French characteristics. Instead, they were savages like the Saxons and Celts, and as a result he proclaimed the text of *Tristan et Iseut* to be of Celtic origin. However, Paris’s argument was based upon his view that medieval literature was dictated by conventions and rules and not by the creative spirit of the poet or writer. His was, of course, a nineteenth-century way of seeing literary works, and yet it is surprising that it can still be seen today in works on *Tristan et Iseut* which have the same premises.²⁷

²⁶ Paris, “L’esprit normand en Angleterre,” 46–7.

²⁷ For example, Gallais, *Genèse du roman occidental*; Chocheyras, *Tristan et Iseut*; Baumgartner, *Tristan et Iseut*; and Capellán, *Tristan et Dionysos*.

For Paris, as we have seen, French medieval literature was the product of the melting pot of races that resulted from the migrations of the early Middle Ages; Arthurian material was thus the consequence of the mixture of Celtic, Saxon, Norman, French and Germanic influences which came together in northwest Europe:

*Il serait injuste et téméraire de dire que, sans l'intervention des Normands, l'Angleterre serait peu à peu retombée dans la barbarie et aurait été pour toujours exclue du rôle capital qu'elle a joué plus tard dans l'histoire du monde; mais on a le droit d'affirmer qu'en fait ce rôle a été dû au remplacement, pendant des siècles, de l'élément germanique par l'élément roman dans la direction des destinées du pays; et ce qui est vrai de l'histoire l'est aussi de la littérature.*²⁸

This is one of the few instances of his textual analysis where Paris was explicitly concerned with matters of cultural identity, and where he attempted to explain cultural assimilation in a detailed way. Regarding the *fabliaux*, Paris had rushed to conclusions about the transmission and assimilation of Indian tales but failed to demonstrate how one culture could actually adopt another culture's traditions. In studying the Arthurian cycle, however, Paris engaged in considerations about the peoples involved, being scientific-positivistic in intention (by using philology in his analysis) but romantic in method (in the sense of his tendency to leap into pure literary criticism). When he realised that philology alone did not solve the questions that he asked about the origin of the Arthurian tales, he then resorted to purely literary analysis. This, as we have seen, was viewed in late nineteenth-century France as a speculative and romantic approach with little scientific value.

Paris's view about the Celtic origin of the Arthurian tales led to yet another difficulty, one which had not been solved by those who preceded Paris: which Celtic group had created the Arthurian legends? Were they a Welsh, Cornish or French creation? As we will see, it was an important issue, since it involved praising the nation that created the noble Arthurian legends and blaming those which produced the less admirable tales, such as *Tristan et Iseut*. Paris invoked philology in order to prove the origins of Arthurian tales. Yet, in practice, as I said above, he did not use, as he thought he did, a scientific-positivistic methodology. Rather, his analysis included historical and literary criticism, not being either purely romantic or positivistic in the senses defined above. Now we turn to Paris's works on the Arthurian cycle. What, then, were the romantic and scientific-

²⁸ Paris, "L'esprit normand en Angleterre," 48–9.

positivistic elements within his work, and why did Paris opt for one or the other when analysing the Arthurian cycle?

Gaston Paris's "Positivistic" Approach

*Mais le conflit des systèmes n'est-il pas plus intéressant qu'un dogme accepté, et la vérité recherchée plus passionnante que la vérité découverte?*²⁹

Paris's scientific-positivistic approach to Arthurian studies, one that he also adopted in his studies on the epics and the *fabliaux*, is particularly apparent in his 1884 comments on Foerster's edition of the works of Chrétien de Troyes. Here Paris showed his frustration because a German scholar had been the first to edit Chrétien's texts, as he had hoped a French scholar would be the first to publish on the subject. Paris's review of Foerster's work was based on the philological problems identified by Foerster in dealing with Chrétien's poems, and reveals his preference for philology (seen as a scientific method) over literary criticism.

Even before Foerster's edition of Chrétien de Troyes, the publication of Potvin's work on *Perceval* in 1866 had been, for French scholars, the first occasion to be worried about the progress of German scholars in terms of Arthurian studies:

*Enfin, nous relèverons surtout une véritable acquisition pour la science, acquisition d'autant plus précieuse qu'elle est due à un critique français, sur un terrain exploré vingt fois vainement par les savants d'outre-Rhin. ... En somme, nous ne pouvons que regarder cet ouvrage comme un excellent début, et qu'engager l'auteur à persévérer dans une voie où jusqu'à présent la science allemande n'avait guère rencontré de concurrence française.*³⁰

The rivalry between the two nations was particularly clear in the field of the epic, because this was the national literature par excellence, but it was also to be found in all areas of medieval literature. The fact that Michelant had been preparing an edition of Chrétien de Troyes for 15 years, and that Foerster managed to publish it before Michelant did, therefore bringing glory to Germany and not to France, was cause for bitterness and intellectual jealousy, as he expressed in the following quote:

²⁹ Bédier, "Les lais de Marie de France," 847.

³⁰ Paris, "Tristan et Iseult, Poème de Gotfrid de Strasbourg, par A. Bossert," 57–8.

*L'apparition du premier volume de l'édition si attendue des œuvres de Chrétien de Troyes causera à tous les romanistes un plaisir qui, il faut l'avouer, n'ira pas sans quelque mélange d'amertume pour ceux qui sont Français. Il nous est assurément pénible de voir les œuvres complètes du plus célèbre poète français du XI^e siècle publiées pour la première fois en Allemagne dans une édition vraiment scientifique; mais si nous en éprouvons quelque mauvaise humeur, elle ne doit se tourner que contre nous-mêmes. La plupart des manuscrits de Chrétien sont en France, et si nous n'avons pas eu le courage de les copier ou le talent de les éditer, nous serions mal venus à exprimer à l'étranger qui le fait à notre place un autre sentiment que celui de la reconnaissance.*³¹

Again, when expressing his desire that French scholarship would one day reach the level already attained by the Germans in the study of their national culture, Paris said:

*J'espère toujours ... qu'un temps viendra où on ne comprendra pas en France cet étrange renoncement à une tâche qui devrait nous être aussi agréable qu'elle nous est naturellement dévolue, où la période actuelle, dans laquelle il paraît vingt fois plus de travaux sur l'ancien français à l'étranger qu'en France, sera jugée avec l'étonnement et la sévérité qu'elle mérite, et où la reconstruction scientifique de notre passé linguistique et littéraire sera considérée à bon droit comme une œuvre éminemment nationale.*³²

Paris only started studying the Arthurian tales in 1881. He did so for several reasons, some of a personal nature, some of a more intellectual one.³³ It is the latter which interests us here. Paris was concerned with the primacy that German scholars had achieved in medieval studies, especially because Foerster had attacked the ideas of French scholars of the period 1830–50 about the origin of Arthurian tales. For Foerster, the *matière de Bretagne* was not necessarily Celtic, but fully French, a product of Anglo-Norman interaction and the diffusion of Celtic culture in Continental Europe. If Paris was inclined to agree with him in the case of the French poet Chrétien de Troyes, he was nevertheless reluctant to consider the earliest versions of *Tristan et Iseut* as Anglo-Norman literary creations. Paris argued that Foerster was wrong in claiming that the Celtic elements present in Chrétien de Troyes' tales had been created by the French.

³¹ Paris, "Christian von Troyes samtliche Werke," 441.

³² *Ibid.*, 441.

³³ See Bloch, "Mieux vaut jamais que tard," 69, and Hult, "Gaston Paris and the invention of courtly love," 200–7, for a discussion about the possible personal reasons why Paris decided to start studying the Arthurian cycle in 1881.

Instead, he believed them to have been transmitted orally and merely put into written form by Anglo-Norman poets:

*Cependant M. F. reconnaît qu'il y a des cas où on ne peut guère procéder autrement: là est la vraie solution, tout est une question d'espèces; mais je ne puis admettre que le système qu'il préconise pour Chrétien de Troyes soit le seul 'véritablement scientifique', tandis que les tentatives d'uniformisation ne devraient être considérées que comme des exercices utiles pour l'enseignement, mais dépourvus de caractère scientifique, parce que nous n'avons pas le moyen de rendre nos restitutions parfaites et assurées et que les résultats qu'on croit acquis aujourd'hui seront renversés demain, 'comme montrent des faits concrets appartenant à ces dernières années'.*³⁴

As before, the main problem faced by scholars working on the Arthurian cycle was the lack of positive evidence, which meant scholars could never provide a comprehensive theory that accounted for the origin of the tales, their diversity, or the imitations that were produced in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Paris believed, however, that if the first poet to tell an Arthurian tale was not Welsh, but French, he must have recounted it from a Welsh version that he knew, because no French poet could have created the Arthurian ones tales:

*Nous ne savons si les conteurs qui ... remplissent de récits sur Arthur et ses chevaliers les cours des rois et des princes, sont, au moins en partie, de race bretonne; on peut l'admettre; en tout cas s'ils étaient Français, c'est aux sources galloises qu'ils puisaient.*³⁵

For him, it was clear that:

*Les romans de la Table Ronde sont les romans chevaleresques par excellence: or les Gallois n'ont connu la chevalerie et tout ce qui en dépend que par les Français, devenus leurs voisins: mœurs, armement, habitation, usages, tout ce qui fait le costume des romans bretons est (sauf quelques traits isolés restés çà et là) absolument étranger à la société galloise.*³⁶

Since the plot elements of Arthurian tales pointed to their connections with a knightly class and an aristocratic way of life, it was clear, in Paris's opinion, that French poets had turned Celtic stories of love and adventure

³⁴ Paris, "Cligés, par W. Foerster," 443–4.

³⁵ Paris, "Études sur les romans de la Table Ronde," 466.

³⁶ Ibid., 468 (emphasis in original).

into the immortal epics of the Round Table. In origin, they were Welsh, as expressed in the names of places and characters, but it was the French who made Arthurian tales what they were, as could be seen in the careful study of Welsh and French history in the twelfth century.

Concerning Chrétien's poems, Gaston Paris was as "positivistic" as he could be; he primarily used philology (textual analysis), and then literary analysis, to prove his claims about their origin and transmission. For a scientific-positivistic scholar, philology had to come first. Paris's studies on Chrétien's poems, however, were based on Foerster's edition and not on the original manuscripts, an approach which nineteenth-century scholars regarded as non-positivistic. How else was Paris romantic in his approach to Arthurian tales?

Gaston Paris's "Romantic" Approach

*Il faut donc laisser aux Celtes la gloire d'avoir créée, en face de épopées plus héroïques que d'autres races ont produites ou qu'ils ont enfantées eux-mêmes, l'incomparable épopée de l'amour.*³⁷

*Dans le concert à mille voix de la poésie des races humaines, c'est la harpe bretonne qui donne la note passionnée de l'amour illégitime et fatal, et cette note se propage de siècle en siècle, enchantant et troublant les cœurs des hommes de sa vibration profonde et mélancolique.*³⁸

Despite his self-proclaimed positivism, when it came to *Tristan et Iseut*, Paris's approach was no longer based on scientific arguments, but instead shifted from philology to mythology so as to identify, in the Tristanian poems, universal myths which the Celts had transformed into legends.³⁹ His scientism was restricted to the analysis of the names of places and characters.⁴⁰ Since the origins of these names proved impossible to trace, Gaston Paris seems to have lost interest in the subject in the mid-1890s, and thus failed to respond to articles questioning his theories on this subject.

It was in Paris's studies on the Tristanian cycle that he most clearly departed from positivism as a method with which to analyse medieval

³⁷ Paris, "Notes sur les romans relatifs à Tristan," 598–9.

³⁸ Paris, "Tristan et Iseut," 117.

³⁹ Ibid., 118–21.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Paris, "De aetate rebusque Mariae Franciae, par Eduardus Mall," 71–2, "Richard li Biaus, by W. Foerster," 478–80, "Der Münchener Brut, par K. Hofmann and K. Vollmoeller," 144–6, "Un poème retrouvé de Chrétien de Troyes," 399–400 and "Die Lais der Marie de France, par K. Warnke," 598–608.

texts. He used philology in his Arthurian studies, as did most of his contemporaries. However, the philological analysis of Tristan tales led to no conclusions regarding their origin. The case of Lancelot, for instance, was complicated for philologists since the name Lancelot could have a Germanic or a French origin. With Tristan's name and the names of other characters in the Tristan stories, the possibilities were even more diverse, so that critics resorted to using narrative elements of the stories to draw conclusions about their origins and spread.

As with the Arthurian tales in general, Paris's chief argument in his studies on *Tristan et Iseut* was that these tales were Celtic in origin, and could never have been produced by a French author. In his earlier studies of the Tristan stories, Paris affirmed that the Celts had created these legends, and that, even when written down in late twelfth-century France, they represented a wild, passionate love, which was completely different from the "French" courtly love of, say, Lancelot and Guinevère:

*Les Celtes ont créé, dans l'histoire de Tristan et d'Iseut, le plus merveilleux poème d'amour qu'ait peut-être produit l'humanité, mais cet amour sauvage, indomptable et passionnée n'a rien des conventions, des quintessences et des langueurs de l'amour chevaleresque.*⁴¹

The starting point of Paris's argument for the Celtic origin of Tristan poems is that they did not resemble any other literature of twelfth-century France. For him, their character and inspiration were different, since the lesson they preached and the way they put forward their message of illicit love was not French in nature:

*Les versions anciennes sont toutes en vers français et remontent au XII^e siècle; mais les récits qu'elles contiennent ne rappellent, ni par leur caractère, ni par leur inspiration, ceux des chansons de geste, des petites pièces lyrico-épiques, des romans imités de l'antiquité ou des contes à rire, qui formaient le répertoire ancien de la poésie profane en France. Ils ne sont pas sortis de l'imagination française; ils ont une origine étrangère, et les poètes français n'ont fait que les adapter et les transmettre. C'est grâce aux poètes français que cette belle légende, qui aurait péri sans presque laisser de traces, a pris une vie nouvelle qui n'est pas encore épuisée; mais c'est à la race celtique que revient l'honneur de l'avoir créée.*⁴²

Again, Paris was making clear the point he had made repeatedly that a national spirit is necessarily present in each literary sample produced by a

⁴¹ Paris, "Études sur les romans de la Table Ronde: Lancelot du Lac," 521.

⁴² Paris, "Tristan et Iseut," 117.

member of that nation, and that only what was in line with the entire nation's outlook could be written and transmitted with any success. For Paris, as we have seen, free individual creation was impossible, because individuals would always be constrained by something greater than themselves, something he called the "*atmosphère*" of a time. This was one of the reasons that Paris was concerned with historicising not only medieval literature, but also with tracing a history of medieval studies themselves. In seeing literature in this way, as something entirely determined by its environment, Paris failed to allow that individual poets or writers could have any active part in their own literary creations. He failed to see that writers are not just guided by a spirit that is exterior to them, and that a great artist does not just express but can also change the conventions of an era. Paris did not believe that individuals changed history; he believed that history changed itself, which is why he always referred to some historical moments in French history, such as the 1789 revolution, as "a critical moment for all the French." The French ultimately represented France, the receptacle of actions that seemed to lack a subject or agent, but which somehow changed history forever.

For Paris, the second proof that the *Tristan* poems were not French in their origin was the abundance of foreign elements in their plot, elements which he traced back to the mysterious British Isles. He cited the presence of sea voyages, for example, to claim that island people must have created *Tristan*, because island people have always regarded the sea as important, unlike the French, who used rivers as a means of transport.⁴³ His point could hardly be more debatable: to infer that island people must have written a story that uses sea transportation rather than river transportation was not meant to be part of a scientific-positivistic methodology. It was a premise to which Paris arrived through deduction, which, as seen in Chapter Three, was not part of a scientific approach. If one followed Paris's methodology, one could deduce that a nation with no coast (such as Switzerland) would never produce a text that mentioned the sea.

A second piece of evidence that Paris used to show the Celtic origin of *Tristan et Iseut* was that the social setting described in *Tristan et Iseut* was very different from that of twelfth-century France: "*Les hommes qui ont conçu cette étonnante histoire d'amour menaient une vie presque sauvage, au sein de forêts à peine éclaircies çà et là.*"⁴⁴ For Paris, the French people had never lived a savage life, it was the men and women of the British Islands who had once had barbaric characteristics.

⁴³ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 125.

Still disclaiming the idea that *Tristan et Iseut* could have had a French origin, Paris also deduced that if Tristan were a truly French hero, he would have had a horse as his best friend, and not a dog. For him, the fact that Tristan's best friend was Husdent, the dog, is clear evidence of the foreign way of thinking of those who wrote the poem, and their unfamiliarity with the French fondness of horses, which was evident in Lancelot's story:

*Les héros combattent à pied; le cheval, ce personnage indispensable de tout roman français, ne figure ici que dans des scènes accessoires, comme monture de chanteurs errants ou de dames: Tristan a un ami presque aussi cher qu'Iseut elle-même, son chien Husdent; il n'a pas de cheval aimé comme Roland, Renaud, ou Guillaume d'Orange.*⁴⁵

The theory of the “*cheval aimé*,” as it was called, not without a touch of sarcasm, was one of Gaston Paris's least successful ideas. It was indeed ludicrous to identify an alleged need for any French hero in a literary work to own a horse in order to be recognised as truly French. His case was not based on anything resembling what scholars at the time would consider factual evidence, but rather on speculative deduction derived from a handful of examples. Even here, Paris was analysing the story according to his own understanding of medieval literature. Since he claimed that all twelfth-century literary works were dictated by literary conventions and the spirit of French *chevalerie*, he could not fathom that a French author would have broken that rule and included an element that would have jeopardised the popularity of his work. Lancelot had a horse; Lancelot was popular. Therefore, in Paris's reasoning, any French author would have used a horse as a hero's best friend in order to make the text more appealing.

Despite its obvious speculative nature, Paris's analysis did lead to an important conclusion, one which informed views on the Tristan poems from the late nineteenth century to the present day. For him, Tristanian poems were not to be perceived as French because they did not resemble other French texts and because of the foreign elements of the plot. Paris had made two main claims. First, he argued that the texts had a Celtic source, one that was clear in every single element of the plot. For him, *Tristan et Iseut* had all the elements of a Celtic poem. He found no evidence of Christian morality in the poem, nor any trace of French social organisation. After careful reflection, he concluded that they had to be of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 125.

Celtic origin, which then accounted for all the extraordinary elements they presented:

*Non seulement il n'y a pas dans ces âmes violentes la moindre pénétration de la morale chrétienne ... il n'y a aux passions aucun frein de quelque nature qu'il soit, sauf peut-être, chez Tristan, un certain respect et un reste de fidélité pour le roi, qu'il trahit, mais qui est son seigneur et son oncle ... C'est bien le héros idéal d'une société barbare, soutien de ses clients, terreur de ses ennemis, impétueux et rusé, magnanime et impitoyable, soumettant tout ce qui l'entoure à l'ascendant d'une force irrésistible et d'une personnalité développée sans mesure.*⁴⁶

Second, Paris concluded that the twelfth-century Tristan texts were not unified compositions. He claimed that their narrative followed no logical structure, and as a result of this analysis, one could infer that these poems must have been composed from a number of earlier *lai*. In order to back up this claim, he used Wolf's considerations with regard to the epic (about what is essential to a poem, and what can be seen as later additions to it):

*Tout cela est incontestable, mais tout cela ne prouve qu'une chose: c'est la force et la vitalité extraordinaires du thème qui a pu s'assimiler tant d'éléments épars dans l'air ambiant. L'assimilation est d'ailleurs souvent restée imparfaite: plusieurs des épisodes qui viennent d'être cités manquent dans l'une ou l'autre des versions anciennes; la plupart pourraient disparaître sans changer l'essence du récit.*⁴⁷

Paris's main claims posed problems for nineteenth-century scholars: if Tristan texts were to be seen as the carriers of a brutal and individualistic morality that was opposite to the Christian one,⁴⁸ why did they become so popular during the Middle Ages? Gaston Paris partially answered these questions by saying: "*Les poètes français ne sont pas directement responsables de leur attitude immorale en face des amours de Tristan et d'Iseut; ils n'ont fait, comme je l'ai déjà indiqué, que suivre docilement leur matière.*"⁴⁹

The tales of *Tristan et Iseut* did not simply present philological and literary challenges because of the difficulty of tracing their origins. More

⁴⁶ Ibid., 129.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁸ This brutal morality was expressed in plot elements such as Isolde's betrayal of Brangien, her perjury on two occasions when denying her affair with Tristan, and the sojourn in *Morrois*.

⁴⁹ Paris, "Tristan et Iseut," 173.

importantly, for nineteenth-century scholars, the problem these poems raised was a moral one. As we have seen, the story of the two lovers offends both the medieval conception of the knightly class as being morally superior and the idea of courtly love as being dictated by social and political rules. It was the story of an adulterous couple, one whose heroes were a queen and a knight who lied and who committed crimes against their friends, servants, friends, spouses and sovereign king, which, in the opinion of nineteenth-century scholars, nothing could excuse. For nineteenth-century scholars, it was problematic that a story with such an immoral subject matter could have been accepted and transmitted orally. More importantly, it was surprising that someone had decided to write the story down, thereby causing the immoral story to spread even more widely. In their viewpoint, and this is the reason why Tristanian poems were subject of debate in the 1870s and 80s, the French of the past (as the French of today) would not have willingly produced a story which contradicted their morals.

In reply, of course, it could be argued that *Tristan et Iseut* was not viewed as an immoral text in the twelfth century. It can be argued that the poem may have been a satirical text, one which presented issues such as free will, the importance of the spoken word and the liaison between king and subjects through a critical lens. The truth is that it is impossible to know if *Tristan et Iseut* was intended to make the audience laugh or cry, or even both. Nevertheless, there is nothing in the text that allows scholars to claim, as they did in the nineteenth century, that the text offended a certain morality. Even if they did, there is no reason to doubt that poetry could challenge existing societal values.

Paris's views on *Tristan et Iseut* were guided by his already expressed belief that medieval poets took no active part on the creation of the poems, merely writing in line with literary conventions. For Paris, authors were not free to challenge the rules of literary production. As a result, Paris did not ask whether Tristan poems were such a success because they introduced elements that other poems did not convey, such as a denunciation of the knightly order or considerations of free will. Yet both these issues were debated in the mid-twelfth century, following the publication of Peter Abelard's *Ethics* (1138), in which the author presented for the first time in history the idea that culpability depends on the will to commit a sin. It is odd that Paris never gave a thought to the idea that perhaps knights and ladies were not portrayed as they actually were, but that poets may have composed their representations from their imagination, and that nineteenth-century views of knights and ladies drawn from literary works such as *Lancelot* and *Erec et Enide* may have

been wrong. This was a central problem in nineteenth-century scholarship: understanding literary sources as historically accurate documents, scholars had to strip them of all aspects of individual creation so as to make them look like documentary sources. It is ironic that today, scholars claim to accept the idea that historical and literary sources are subjective, thus rejecting the positivistic methodology, yet much modern criticism of *Tristan et Iseut* is still based on nineteenth-century speculations about the origin of the tales, the names of characters and so on.⁵⁰

Debate about the immoral aspect of Tristan poems by scholars in the late nineteenth century was largely responsible for the increased fame of Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligès* in the 1880s. This short, unpretentious poem achieved great popularity in the nineteenth century precisely because of Foerster's pioneering idea that the poem should be seen as anti-Tristan.⁵¹ Foerster claimed that Chrétien de Troyes was morally superior to the Tristan authors as a poet, not only because of his *Cligès* and its criticism of Tristan's stories, but also because of the tale *Del Roi Marc et d'Iseut la Blonde*. This text, which was never actually found in manuscript form, was the object of much speculation in the 1880s and 90s, particularly regarding the fact that Tristan's name does not appear in the title, thus becoming the most cited reference in medieval criticism about the Tristan tales, although no one had ever actually read it. This was a characteristic of nineteenth-century scholarship: scholars readily engaged in passionate disputes over an issue that did not match the requirements of a scientific basis that they themselves had stipulated, causing their discipline to be based on rhetoric rather than the actual investigation of documents and facts in line with what they themselves hailed as the scientific method.

Concerning Amour Courtois

Paris's views on the Arthurian cycle were to prove extremely influential in twentieth-century debates about Chrétien's tales and Tristanian poems. Particularly influential were his claims about the nature of love in these tales, a type of love which Paris claimed had never before been seen in European literature, and which he named "*amour courtois*" or "courtly love." This label still persists in both historiographical and literary debates on Arthurian literature and medieval culture in general, so it is important to examine its creation here. First mentioned by Paris in

⁵⁰ See, for example, Gallais, *Genèse du roman occidental*; Chocheyras, *Tristan et Iseut*; Baumgartner, *Tristan et Iseut*; Capellán, *Tristan et Dionysos*.

⁵¹ Paris, "Cligès, par W. Foerster," 229–327.

1881, and developed as a concept in 1883, Paris only used the name “*amour courtois*” when referring to Chrétien de Troyes’s tales, where it meant a type of love which was illicit but which also followed specific social and political rules:

*L’amour est un art, une science, une vertu, qui a ses règles tout comme la chevalerie ou la courtoisie, règles qu’on possède et qu’on applique mieux à mesure qu’on a fait plus de progrès, et auxquelles on ne doit pas manquer sous peine d’être jugé indigne.*⁵²

Paris claimed that there were two reasons for the emergence of this type of illicit love in the twelfth century. First, the behaviour of the French aristocracy, who were guided by rules of comportment, manners and marriage. Second, the fact that Henry II initiated festive occasions that included people of both genders, causing them to mix socially and thus creating the idea of love outside the bonds of marriage.⁵³ For Paris, the point of discussing the love that appeared in Arthurian tales was that it allowed him to show that social orders were as much influenced by rules as every other aspect of medieval life. More importantly still, for him, literature itself also followed strict rules, with which poets and their audiences were well acquainted. This is why Paris claimed that Lancelot poems were the most popular Arthurian tales during the medieval period, not being mere literary creations, but revealing what actually happened in people’s daily lives. In contrast with his characterisation of Chrétien’s work, Paris declared that *Tristan et Iseut* was not a case of *amour courtois*, it was “*autre chose*.” He claimed this because *Tristan et Iseut* was a tale of Celtic love, and the Celts did not know chivalry, and so could not have understood courtly love. For him, the love of Tristan and Isolde, made real by the potion rather than by the designs of the human heart, was “*une passion simple, ardente, naturelle, qui ne connaît pas les subtilités et les raffinements de celui de Lancelot et de Guenièvre*.”⁵⁴

Another aspect of Paris’s concept of courtly love was the emphasis given to the idea that Arthurian tales were written for women, and that the scholars who studied these tales themselves had feminine qualities. He certainly suggested that his own father was feminine and romantic when analysing these poems, because he analysed them with his heart, not with his scientific mind. This is why, Paris claimed, a romantic approach had been so difficult to suppress in the matters of Arthurian literature. For

⁵² Paris, “Études sur les romans de la Table Ronde,” 519.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 520.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 519.

Paris, his father's generation, although committed to the idea of making medieval studies more scientific, did not possess the method to do so, and therefore published works that were dedicated to the general public, to *érudits* and women, rather than to scholars and academics:

Le point de vue purement littéraire fut toujours prédominant dans l'intérêt que mon père portait aux productions du moyen âge. Toute sa vie, il chercha à en répandre le goût, à leur conquérir des sympathies chez les gens du monde, chez les littérateurs purs, chez les femmes elles-mêmes."⁵⁵

For the younger Paris, the only matter that really counted in the assessment of Arthurian tales was philology; anything else was mere romantic speculation. This is why he refrained from discussing the plot of *Tristan et Iseut*, and restricted himself merely to discussing the mythological aspects of the poem which he saw as clues to its origins.

Paris's use of the term "courtly love" was of little significance in the late nineteenth century, in the sense that other scholars did not adopt it and Paris himself used it only rarely. Other scholars hardly ever acknowledged Gaston Paris's considerations on this particular theme, as they were busy discussing the origins of the Arthurian poems, rather than analysing their plots. It was not until the early twentieth century that scholars like Bédier took note of Paris's idea and speculated about its usefulness and value in the study of medieval literature. Ironically, the reason why Gaston Paris is best known today, namely for having coined the concept of courtly love, was at the time a minor aspect of his work.

Concerning the Prose Romances

Prose Arthurian romances were works which Paulin Paris had seen as very important, since he believed that they were written before the poetic ones, therefore being the source for all Arthurian poems. His claim that the prose romances came first and the poetic tales came later was the origin of the idea of Arthurian tales in nineteenth-century scholarship being seen as "poetics without a poem." As time passed, Paulin Paris's idea was questioned, as the discovery of manuscripts of poetic tales seemed to suggest that they preceded the prose ones.

Not missing an opportunity to discredit his father's work, Gaston Paris described prose tales as chaotic, a "*selva oscura*," something with very little literary merit and very little interest, an inferior imitation of the earlier poetic tales. Paris did not care for prose romances and never really

⁵⁵ Paris, "Paulin Paris et la littérature française du moyen âge," 219.

studied them, with the exception of Ulrich's *Lancelot*, which he assessed in order to prove that this particular poem was nothing but an imitation of Chrétien's *Lancelot*. This, of course, did not stop him from making comments on the prose romances during his years of work on the Arthurian tales:

*Il est établi par là même que les romans arthuriens en prose ne sont pas antérieurs aux romans en vers, mais qu'au contraire ils en sont une imitation, un développement, une suite, et représentent dans l'histoire du cycle breton, une phase très distincte, secondaire et postérieure.*⁵⁶

Hult said that in laying aside prose romances, Gaston Paris was metaphorically killing his own father, for whom the prose romances were extremely important in originating all later verse romances of the Arthurian cycle.⁵⁷ Paulin Paris died in 1881, which meant, in Hult's opinion, that the younger Paris probably thought it was time to bury his father and his romantic influence in medieval studies in the late nineteenth century. The conflict between the love for his father and his wish to bury him had created, in his career, a contradiction that was represented in the concept of courtly love, by nature a contradictory love, one based on a combination of elements that could never be combined. Combining respect for his father's theories (romantic theories in Paris's view) and his own (scientific-positivistic in his view) was impossible because, in Hult's opinion, Paris was too conscious of the importance of philological positivism for French academia.⁵⁸ This is why, in Hult's opinion, Gaston Paris never really debated with his father's theories in his earlier articles on the Arthurian cycle, in 1881 and 1883, preferring instead to reject their main points without giving him any credit in medieval studies in general or in the specific matter of Arthurian studies.

To a certain extent, Hult is right. The younger Paris did use the first opportunity after his father's death to bury his influence on French medieval scholarship. Nevertheless, he did not do so solely for personal reasons, as Hunt implied, he also did it for academic reasons. Paris did give credit to his father for the fact that he translated so many medieval texts, making them available to his own and later generations; but translation was not the purpose of Gaston Paris's contemporaries. Their concern was with philological analysis and textual reconstruction, which was, as Hult said, something unknown to Paulin Paris's generation. Gaston

⁵⁶ Paris, "Études sur les romans de la Table Ronde," 534.

⁵⁷ Hult, "Gaston Paris and the invention of courtly love," 202–7.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 200–2.

Paris chose to ignore his father's theories since he saw them as outdated, and he was not interested in debating with them because they belonged to a previous school, one with which he did not intend to argue. In the late nineteenth century, the understanding of a historian's or a literary critic's task was to provide material for textual criticism and textual editing, which were the goals of human sciences at the time. For Paris, it would be a waste of time to argue with his dead father's hypotheses once they were so evidently wrong. He assumed that if they were obviously wrong to him, they would be to anyone else. It was thus more important for him to engage with more recent theories. The notion of courtly love and Paris's rejection of his father's theories on prose romances were not a result of Paris's feelings; they were rather the outcome of his investigations of medieval history and literature, and therefore valid theories in context.

Having looked at Gaston Paris's theories about the poems of the Arthurian cycle and the combative nature of his enquiries into Arthurian prose romances, it is now essential to look at the early response to Gaston Paris's theories. First, I will look at the immediate replies to his ideas by his colleagues, then Joseph Bédier's criticism of Gaston Paris's work on the Arthurian cycle to close the discussion I started here about the nature and method of Gaston Paris and the history of medievalism in the late nineteenth century.

Other Theories about the Origins of the Arthurian Tales

It is impossible to examine critically the early national literatures of Europe, without being struck by the fact that a great deal which is commonly regarded as original and peculiar to a given country, is in reality only a reproduction, in a different form, of the creations of other countries and of an earlier age.⁵⁹

If Gaston Paris's theory about the Celtic origin of the Arthurian tales was popular,⁶⁰ being still in use in modern work, it nevertheless faced several competing theories which rejected the direct Celtic influence on the Arthurian tales and provided alternative accounts of the origins of the Arthurian poems. These theories displayed not only the concern with the problem of origins common to nineteenth-century literary criticism, but also exemplified the methods through which historians, philologists and

⁵⁹ Gurteen, *The Arthurian epic*, 22.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Ferdinand Lot's essays: "Études sur la provenance du cycle arthurien," 497–528; "Études sur la provenance du cycle arthurien (suite)," 1–32; and "Nouveaux essais sur la provenance du cycle arthurien," 1–48.

literary critics gathered and made sense of their evidence. In particular, given that Gaston Paris's work was motivated by a desire to make French scholarship more scientific and so deserving of a privileged status among European nations, we need to look at the attack suffered by his Celtic theory which suggested that Paris was perhaps not being as scientific as he himself would have wished.

One of the most vigorous critics of Gaston Paris's Celtic theory was Arbois de Jubainville, whose theories gave rise to what Bédier called the French school. For Arbois de Jubainville, the story of *Tristan et Iseut* was not a product of the Celtic mentality, but of the French. He claimed that the change in the French social fabric in the twelfth century was responsible for the creation of a tale such as *Tristan et Iseut*, which questioned the existing social order. For Arbois de Jubainville, it was the emergence of women as patrons in the twelfth century which had led to the creation of a new type of literature, one which, more than the belligerent epics written by and for men, was meant to appeal to a female audience. That is why, in his opinion, women had such an important part in the Arthurian romances, because it was women who paid poets to write the stories for women themselves. Rather than seeing them as Celtic tales, Arbois claimed that they were surely French:

*Mais le type de l'amour illégitime, tout-puissant, comme on le trouve dans le roman de Tristan et Iseut, est une création française du XII^e siècle, et sa naissance est le résultat spontané du milieu où elle s'est produite.*⁶¹

Arbois claimed that the exotic elements in the *Tristan* tale were used simply to increase interest in the story, arguing that it had been produced by the Continental French, who had for some time been fascinated with the stories of the *merveilles* of the British Isles. For Arbois, Paris's mistake was not to have properly understood the social environment that gave birth to the Arthurian romances.

In order to see how Paris replied to criticism of his theories, we can look at his article in *Romania* in which he refuted what Arbois said on the grounds of his assumption that the French would not have been able to create such an immoral story. He said that if Arbois did not believe the Arthurian poems were of Welsh origin, because no form of literature with similar themes survived in Wales, then one should consider these tales to be of German origin, because some surviving Arthurian tales did come from Germany, and they may well have been the original ones. In the end,

⁶¹ Arbois de Jubainville, "Article de M. Gaston Paris sur la légende de Tristan et Iseult," 407.

the poems could be Celtic or Germanic, because, in Paris's opinion, they certainly could not be French:

*Si l'amour de Tristan et d'Iseut n'est pas celtique ... il faut qu'il soit germanique, car il n'est certainement pas français, nos plus que le lovendranc ... ou les oreilles de cheval du roi Marc.*⁶²

Arbois' criticism of Paris, even if timidly expressed, was also authoritative and persuasive, because it was based on historical elements and took into account the issues in which Paris's answer was most controversial (the theory of the "*cheval aimé*," for example). It was from Arbois' work that Bédier would develop his criticisms of Paris a decade later. Paris's inability to demonstrate his hypothesis in the face of Arbois' objections and his insistence on a foreign origin for the Tristan poems, refusing to consider that a French poet might have created them, weakened his later arguments on the origins of *Tristan et Iseut*. This was why he never wrote another article on the subject, limiting himself to critiques of other authors' criticism, translations and editions of the Arthurian tales.

Let me take another criticism of Paris's theories, one which was developed by a German scholar. The work of Zimmer, whose hypothesis was that some Arthurian tales were of German origin, was much debated by the French in the 1870s. Although Gaston Paris did not share Zimmer's certainty as to the German origin of Arthurian tales, as we have seen, he used some of his ideas when debating Arbois de Jubainville's hypothesis of the French origin of *Tristan et Iseut*. He finally concluded, again, that if these stories were not Celtic, then they had to be German, because in his viewpoint, they could not conceivably be French. This was, nevertheless, the only point developed by the German school with which Paris agreed. He did not accept the fundamentals behind it (namely Zimmer's hypothesis that the entirety of the Arthurian cycle was of German origin), merely accepting that *Tristan et Iseut* should have a German origin in order to reject Arbois' hypothesis. Paris was thus being inconsistent in the ideas and methodology underlying the scientific argument that he so cherished, because he simply manipulated Arbois' argument in order to reject Zimmer's point, not really using the primary source to find a strong point and thus develop his own views on the subject.

As noted above, Wilhelm Foerster was responsible for elaborating another controversial theory that the Arthurian tales were the creation of Anglo-Norman poets who then transmitted the Arthurian material to the rest of the French people in the early twelfth century. His claim was based

⁶² Paris, "A propos de mon récent article sur Tristan et Iseut," 154.

on his highly questionable assertion that no other nation in the twelfth century had praised conjugal love as the French did:

*Ces éléments, que Chrétien d'après mon opinion a introduits, ne peuvent en aucune manière être la propriété d'un conte gallois; car les idées qui en font le fond, la honte attaché à l'inaction (das Verliegen), l'amour conjugal intime, etc., sont complètement étrangères aux Celtes, sont un produit français continental.*⁶³

Paris refuted Foerster's idea by saying that

*Nous ne pouvons qu'être très flattés de voir l'amour conjugal regardé comme 'un produit français continental'; mais il serait trop facile de montrer que les Celtes n'ont pas ignoré un sentiment qui peut passer pour connu et estimé chez tous les peuples.*⁶⁴

For Paris, all nations have known and represented conjugal love in literature and in art, and it was for this reason that he rejected Foerster's theory.

Gaston Paris did, however, accept Foerster's claim that Chrétien de Troyes's poems should be seen as Anglo-Norman in origin. Nevertheless, he argued that others, particularly the Tristanian poems, could not. His long study of *Erec et Enide* demonstrated that he was reluctant to say from whence that poem had come, or to claim that the origin of Chrétien's poems was the origin of all other Arthurian material. As they were, Chrétien's poems were very refined and in line with the taste of the French, which was not true of all other Arthurian tales:

*Cette variante était-elle continentale ou anglo-normande? La question n'importe pas pour le moment. Quand on montrerait que le conte d'Erec est de provenance armoricaine et non galloise, quand on étendrait cette démonstration à d'autres contes 'bretons', il ne s'en suivrait pas qu'il n'y ait pas eu de poèmes anglo-normands sur la matière de Bretagne, et que ces poèmes n'aient pas servi de sources à des poèmes français plus élégants et plus raffinés, et par là-même éloignés des sources celtiques.*⁶⁵

These theories are important because they show how different the approach to the Arthurian material was in the period 1870–1900 from that in the 1830s to the 1850s: these were two very different intellectual generations. Nevertheless, even the later generation remained “romantic”

⁶³ As cited in Paris's “Erec und Enide, par W. Foerster,” 165.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

in the sense that although they intended to use philology in order to produce scientific scholarly work, they were also rather rhetorical, as in the following passage by Gaston Paris, in which he respectfully presented other scholars' cases against the Celtic theory and announced his intention to debate with them:

Mon savant contradicteur me permettra, malgré cet arrêt, d'essayer de défendre, en la restreignant peut-être, cette 'hypothèse' qui, à mon avis, contient au moins une part d'incontestable vérité. Seulement je ne le ferai pas dans ce compte rendu, ni sans doute de si tôt. J'ai à répondre, en même temps qu'à M. Förster, à M. Golther et à M. Zimmer: tous trois ont juré de ruiner cette odieuse 'hypothèse', le premier au nom de la littérature française et pour l'honneur de Chrétien de Troies, le second au nom de la littérature comparée, le troisième au nom de la philologie celtique. Je demande à mes trois adversaires un répit, comme cela se fait souvent dans nos romans; je demande le temps de me préparer et de m'armer ... Il m'est pour le moment impossible de consacrer aux recherches et aux réflexions que cette discussion exige un temps qui est absorbé par d'autres travaux.⁶⁶

In practice, he never debated with them; he hardly even acknowledged their existence in his later writings on the Arthurian tales. He promised to offer more elements to support his theories, but failed to do so. In failing to develop his arguments, he crossed, as he had before, the barrier which he himself had defined between romanticism and scientific-positivism. Gaston Paris realised that using philology as a resource of science proved a complicated matter because, as we have seen, even philology could not solve the problems raised by the study of the Arthurian cycle. This problem led Bédier to develop a more sceptical attitude towards medieval studies in the late 1880s, 1890s and early twentieth century.

Bédier and the Critique of Arthurian Studies

Que le poème primitif ait été anglais, anglo-normand, ou français, il nous suffit d'avoir établi qu'il a réellement existé et d'en avoir à peu près retrouvé le canevas.⁶⁷

Qu'est-ce qu'une œuvre d'art qui n'est point datée? De quoi peut servir, pour l'histoire des idées, des sentiments et des genres, une œuvre qui flotte

⁶⁶ Ibid., 157–8.

⁶⁷ Bédier, *Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas*, 317.

*indécise dans le temps, revendiquée avec la même vraisemblance par deux ou trois siècles?*⁶⁸

In examining Bédier's critique of Gaston Paris's work on the Arthurian cycle, I will concentrate on the elements of earlier literary analyses with which Bédier did not agree in order to bring the discussion to a close. What did Bédier think was lacking from the analyses of his predecessors? Corbellari referred to the impact of Bédier's *Thomas's Tristan* on modern literary criticism as similar to that of Kant's Copernican revolution in the field of philology, in the sense that it established a completely new set of ideas for text editing and literary analysis.⁶⁹ Indeed, Bédier's theories were responsible for the creation of the modern notion of the medieval "author," this being one of the most important elements in his assessment of medieval texts, although it was one that was often overlooked by his contemporaries. Fortunately, with the recent renewed interest in oral tradition,⁷⁰ modern academics have found Bédier's analyses to be interesting and useful once again.

Bédier dedicated several years of his life to the study of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century versions of the Tristan stories. In 1900, he published a translation edition of *Tristan et Iseut*, using Béroul, Eilhart, Thomas and Gotfrid's poems as the basis for a complete reconstruction of the Tristanian legend, and a critical study of Thomas's *Tristan*, published in two volumes in 1902 and 1905.

For Bédier, all claims about the origins and spread of the Tristanian legend were helpful if regarded as an initial attempt to shed light on the complicated matter of the Tristan romances. Nevertheless, Bédier believed that earlier studies contained several mistakes which he sought to rectify. First, Bédier rejected Gaston Paris's theory of Celtic origin, as well as all other theories which viewed Tristan as a foreign text. He believed instead that *Tristan et Iseut* had been produced by a French poet as a result of his own creative poetic inspiration and the influence of his contemporary environment:

De même dans notre cas: il ne suffit pas que, dans un roman du cycle breton, nous rencontrions un grelot magique, un château enchanté, un nain sorcier, un écu qui rend invulnérable, une épée que seul peut ceindre

⁶⁸ Bédier, "Les lais de Marie de France," 842.

⁶⁹ Corbellari, *Joseph Bédier*, 111.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Zumthor's works on oral performance in medieval literature (*Essai de poétique médiévale*, *La Lettre et la Voix* and *La Poésie et la Voix dans la civilisation médiévale*, to cite a few).

*un preux prédestiné, pour que nous soyons d'emblée autorisés à en attribuer l'insertion dans ce roman aux Celtes encore païens. Ce ne sont, peut-être, que des inventions récentes de trouvères français. Petitcrû, par exemple, que seul Thomas connaît, est peut-être une invention de Thomas, ou de quelque jongleur français, son modèle immédiat. Ce sont, peut-être, non point des débris de mythes vénérables, mais de simples accessoires de féerie pris au matériel roulant des romans d'aventure.*⁷¹

Bédier's argument was that "*la légende de Tristan n'a d'existence que du jour où existe un roman de Tristan.*"⁷² Consequently, the legend started where it was first written, that is, in France. He did not believe, as Paris did, that the Tristan poems were the product of a blend of several different *lais* which poets had taken from the Celtic tradition:

*La théorie la plus généralement admise veut que les poèmes français relatifs à Tristan soient des 'compilations' de récits d'abord indépendants les uns des autres, et qu'ils représentent des efforts plus ou moins manqués pour réduire à la cohérence une masse chaotique d'inventions divergentes et disparates. Cette théorie s'exprime éminemment dans les premiers écrits de M. W. Golther, dans les travaux de M. Fr. Novati et de G. Paris.*⁷³

For Bédier, not only was *Tristan et Iseut* a French tale, it also was a complete story in itself, rather than an amalgamation of earlier *lais*. Although Brugger had already expressed this idea, it was because of Bédier's work that academics began to see Tristanian poems as unified literary works with a coherent narrative thread from the lovers' first meeting to their inevitable death:

*L'unité de création s'y manifeste de deux façons: il y a progression logique de l'action d'une péripétie à l'autre; et ces péripéties sont subordonnées au développement des caractères une fois posés des personnages.*⁷⁴

The most original aspect of Bédier's analysis was the creation of the "Tristanian archetype" theory (1905). While analysing discrepancies in Bérout, Eilhart, Thomas, the prose romance and the *Folies*, Bédier concluded that one poem must originally have produced the different branches of the Tristanian story and that all the surviving poems were the separate branches of a tree whose root was the Tristanian archetype. Ironically, in order to prove his archetype theory, Bédier used the same

⁷¹ Bédier, *Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas*, 143.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 166.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

scientific-positivistic model that Paris himself claimed to have used. Bédier's long and detailed scheme of the Tristanian archetype was largely a philological-positivistic system; however, unlike Paris's, it was one that worked.

Bédier's theory of the archetype presented the Tristanian text called x as the origin of four different branches of Tristanian poems: one branch, called y, was the source of Béroul's and Eilhart's poems, each of these forming themselves into separate branches. The only branches that do not have names in Bédier's diagram of the archetype are the ones whose texts are x and y, because they represent poems which did not survive. All the other branches are named after the surviving poem which, in Bédier's opinion, started the new branch. A second branch was Thomas's texts; a third branch was the poem that was the source of the anonymous texts of the *Folies* of Oxford and Berne; and finally, the fourth branch was the *Prose Tristan*. Each branch had several variations, which, in Bédier's opinion, accounted for the fact that there were so many different versions of the story, some of them with similar elements (for example the duration of the love potion in both Eilhart and Béroul;⁷⁵ the stay in the forest in both Thomas and Gotfrid; and the lovers' deaths in all versions except the *Prose Tristan*).⁷⁶ As said above, in his analysis of Thomas's *Tristan*, Bédier began by dismissing the current theory according to which the earliest Tristan poems and their subsequent versions by Thomas and Béroul were in fact a collection of poems and *lai* devoted to the story of the lovers. While Bédier accepted the existence of an archetype and used Lachmann's scheme to "prove" its existence, he refused to accept, like Paris, the idea that the tree had three main branches. Instead, Bédier believed that it had two main branches, each of which divided into several sub-branches of manuscripts.⁷⁷ The poems in group one, the less sophisticated ones based on Béroul's poem, came to be called "*version commune*" (the primitive version), whereas the poems in group two, based on Thomas's *Tristan*, came to be called "*version courtoise*" (the courtly version).

For Bédier, Paris's theory of three branches (one containing Thomas's poem, one containing Eilhart d'Oberg's poem, and a third one with the

⁷⁵ The Eilhart and Béroul versions are the only ones in which the potion lasted a limited time (four years in Eilhart and three years in Béroul's text).

⁷⁶ Bédier, *Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas*, 309. In all versions, the death of the lovers is caused by a lie told by Isolde of the White Hands to Tristan while he awaited Queen Isolde's arrival. In the *Prose Tristan*, however, Tristan is mortally wounded by Mark, and his final embrace to Isolde causes her death.

⁷⁷ Bédier, *Le roman de Tristan par Thomas*, 309.

prose romance, from which all existing poems had originated) was mistaken. The rival theory of four branches (the three mentioned above plus Béroul's poem) was also wrong. Thus Löseth's tireless work in using all surviving manuscripts to edit his *Tristan*, what Bédier called "*travail d'abeille*," did not bring his text any closer to the original archetype than a text in which the editor had not occupied himself with all these variations. This was an important step in Bédier's progressive scepticism about the so-called scientific method. After carefully placing all the manuscripts and variations in a large, systematic table, Bédier concluded that his predecessors had been mistaken, and that while there had been several texts based on the archetype, they all followed one of two lines in the plot (and therefore were part of one of two branches of manuscripts). The existence of the surviving manuscripts was evidence of the French character of the original poem, as well as of the unity of its composition.⁷⁸

According to Bédier, a certain Bréri, cited by Thomas as the author of his source, may have written the archetype. He did not state this as necessarily accurate, as he believed that Bréri may have been a creation of Thomas's in order to make his text seem more impressive. The important thing here, one which distinguished Bédier's work from that of Gaston Paris and his contemporaries, is that, like Arbois de Jubainville before him, Bédier viewed the Celtic elements in the *Tristan* romances as a French invention, as a twelfth-century French view of what the Celtic style was like.⁷⁹ He thus devoted little attention to the idea of a lost archetype that belonged to Irish or Welsh oral legend even though, in his opinion, the archetype was retrievable, and was possibly still in existence although scholars had not yet found and catalogued it.

Responding to Paris's detailing of the Celtic motifs in the *Tristan* poems, Bédier argued that the very excess of Celtic elements was, paradoxically, proof that the poems were not Celtic. They were the creation of a Frenchman familiar with Celtic traditions, who inserted elements such as the lark that took Isolde's hair to the king to arouse his interest in her, the episode of the sword between the lovers, the magic dog, and others, in order to provide a magical atmosphere for his love story. Bédier claimed that it was the French taste for Celtic tales which led French poets to use Celtic elements in their texts, although the French authors made a more rationalistic use of mythological elements and incorporated them into a coherent story:

⁷⁸ Ibid., 189–313.

⁷⁹ One of Bédier's intentions was, clearly, to reclaim *Tristan* from Wagner and the Germans for the French people (see Nykrog, "A warrior scholar at the Collège de France," 288).

*Ces discussions ont montré encore quel est le double principe de ses remaniements: une naïve tendance rationaliste, qui le porte à atténuer le merveilleux, et surtout son désir de tout enjoliver et de tout adoucir, pour transposer la légende au mode courtois.*⁸⁰

Bédier's understanding of medieval literature was thus diametrically opposed to that of Paris's generation. For Paris, as I have shown, there was very little personal invention in medieval poems, as they were always dictated by the "*atmosphère*," that is, legends, myths and historical facts that had become established traditions. For Bédier, on the other hand, an author's individual contribution to the story that he or she writes is not completely dependent upon historical context, but also depends on a personal genius.⁸¹ Thus, for Bédier, the Tristanian archetype must have been an aesthetically perfect work by an author of superior talent and immense creativity, and not, as Paris believed, the creation of a poet who did nothing more than compile existing *lais*:

*Ne peut-on pas concevoir, par exemple, que, parmi ces 'lais' dispersés, le poète primitif en a rencontré un, déjà enrichi de notions morales étrangères aux Celtes, et que ce conte privilégié lui a fourni pour son œuvre la note, le ton, la couleur?*⁸²

As when writing about *La chanson de Roland*, Bédier denied the possibility of works without authors or authors who are so unimportant they can be said to be almost nonexistent. In his opinion, and this cannot be overemphasised, the author was at the centre of literary creation. This was particularly important as Bédier started editing and translating medieval texts, as he felt himself to be interacting with the medieval author in a manner quite unexplored in previous textual editing and criticism.⁸³

In summary, the debate about the origins of the Arthurian tales that began with Fauriel and La Villemarqué in the 1830s seemed to have been superseded in the 1860s by Gaston Paris's authoritative responses to the work of the previous generation and his formulation of the Celtic theory.

⁸⁰ Bédier, *Le roman de Tristan par Thomas*, 318.

⁸¹ It is also interesting to note that in this point Bédier is subscribing to the eighteenth-century theories of the genius, which were, in the nineteenth century, viewed as romantic. This is more evidence of the combination of positivistic and romantic elements in late nineteenth-century literary criticism.

⁸² Bédier, *Le roman de Tristan par Thomas*, 310.

⁸³ For a criticism of Bédier's theories on *Tristan et Iseut*, see Schoepperle, *Tristan et Isol*.

Yet Bédier went on to overturn this argument by suggesting a French origin, after which the North American scholar Gertrude Schoepperle returned to the Celtic hypothesis.⁸⁴ It is clear in the case of *Tristan et Iseut*, more so than in other texts of the Arthurian cycle, that the questions raised by nineteenth-century scholars were difficult or even impossible to answer. There were two main motivations for these questions about where the texts had originated and how they were transmitted. The first was nationalism, in the sense that only what was viewed as an enhancement of France's reputation was considered truly French (for example the scandalous *fabliaux* were seen as Indian; the immoral Tristan tales were Celtic). The second was the need to make literary studies more scientific. Neither of these nineteenth-century concerns is necessarily important today. Yet the questions themselves persist, even though they have proved impossible to answer by several generations of academics since the 1830s. This continuing desire to identify the origin of the Arthurian tales tends to relegate other important issues to the sidelines, such as the extent to which medieval writers were free to create, and to what extent they were constrained by earlier literary traditions? Were the characters and places they described real or imaginary? Did the society of the time accept Tristan texts and other immoral texts such as *Lancelot*, or had they indeed challenged contemporary morality?

Today, apart from new historicist groups, especially in North America, there is a tendency in historical and literary studies to consider the context of a work as less of an influence on it than the author's own creative genius; however, this was not so in the nineteenth century. In the late nineteenth century, as we have seen, scholars were sure that context determined literary works, which is why they engaged in disputes on the origin of tales. Since today's academics do not necessarily agree with the idea that the context determines the text, it is hard to understand why they are still attached to questions concerning the origin of medieval tales.⁸⁵ In this sense, the imprint that nineteenth-century criticism left was so strong that even today academics tend to follow its methods. Modern academics tend to oscillate between accepting their theories and trying to find more evidence to prove them, or rejecting nineteenth-century theories, while

⁸⁴ Schoepperle, *Tristan and Isolt*, I, 3–4.

⁸⁵ One can use the works of Gallais and Baumgartner on *Tristan et Iseut* to exemplify, using the former, a contemporary work entirely based on the search for the origins of Tristan poems, and the latter, a work in which the author does not explicitly say that she is concerned with finding the sources, but in which she spends a third of the text mapping out the possible origins of the Tristanian tales (Gallais, *Tristan et Iseut*; Baumgartner, *Tristan et Iseut*).

submitting others that are based on the same nineteenth-century principles, ones that have been attacked as “dated” for over a century, yet still remain robust. The question of whether medieval texts are determined by context or not was first explicitly raised by Bédier. This question had been present in nineteenth-century literary criticism, but was previously taken for granted, because it was not the focus of the textual analysis.

In conclusion, Gaston Paris and Bédier’s work and the debates they inaugurated continue to be relevant to Arthurian studies, and, more generally, to modern medieval studies. Bédier’s writings, more than Paris’s, show clearly how difficult it is to discover what can be considered as valid knowledge in human studies, and how the analytical process started in the late nineteenth century, based on logical argument plus rhetoric, did not equate with truth, but only with good scholarly work. The truth hides elsewhere, and neither nineteenth- nor twentieth-century academics have been able to find it.

CONCLUSION

The great leaders of medieval studies in France, Gaston Paris and his contemporaries, were naturally conditioned in their approach to medieval literary texts by what they thought any greater literature stood for: they thought it stood for truth, for the portrayal of accurately observed reality, for consistent psychological motivation, and the subordination of action to character.¹

Here I have examined Gaston Paris's theories on three medieval literary genres: the epic, or "poems without a poet," which he believed to be a product of the whole medieval society at a given time; the *fabliaux*, or "poems without poetics," which he claimed to mirror day-to-day life in the medieval period but having originated in India, and the Arthurian cycle, characterized by "poetics without a poem," meaning Gaston Paris's criticism of his father's claim that the first Arthurian tales were actually prose ones. In looking at Paris's work on these three genres, I have compared Gaston Paris's medievalism and that of his predecessors and contemporaries, also looking at the theories put forward in response to Paris's own.

At first sight, to twenty-first-century academics, the works of Gaston Paris and his contemporaries seem highly dated. Yet, as we have seen, nineteenth-century scholars initiated several trends in medieval studies and medievalism which remain influential in modern studies of the medieval period, such as the Celtic origin of *Tristan* poems, the metaphysical aspect of the epic, the Indian origin of the *fabliaux*, the importance of scientism in literary and textual criticism and the need to examine variations of poems to approach medieval literature. If the questions and answers that modern historians and literary critics ask and find when examining medieval texts differ significantly from those asked and found by nineteenth-century scholars, they are nevertheless following a path which was paved by men like Gaston Paris.

The work of North American new medievalists, who continued the studies of Doolittle, Glencross, Keller, Dakyns and Stock² on nineteenth-

¹ Vinaver, "Critical approaches to medieval romance," 17.

² Doolittle, *The relations between literature and mediaeval studies in France from 1820 to 1860*; Dakyns, *The Middle Ages in French literature*; Stock, "The middle

century medievalism, has done much to make the contribution of nineteenth-century medieval studies known to modern academics. Giving a face, or, in more scholarly terms, a biography and historical context to nineteenth-century scholars, Bloch and Nichols stated:

From the outset we imagined a history of medievalisms aimed at exploring the ways in which medieval studies have been determined by the specific ideological or local, nationalistic or religious, political or personal interests of those who have shaped them. This kind of history considers questions normally excluded from the canon of traditional or high medieval studies, topics such as connoisseurship, professionalization, and popularization.³

In this book, I have tried to distance the analysis from this current trend of literary criticism, according to which nineteenth-century medieval studies were almost entirely determined by historical context and personal interests. I have endeavoured to restore some of the worth of Gaston Paris's work (and of his contemporaries') by emphasising the valuable contributions which they made to scholarship. Rather than looking at late nineteenth-century medievalists' texts as an unsatisfactory product of the historical context in which they were produced, I tried to place Gaston Paris's texts in a longer tradition of literary studies of the medieval period, one started in the romantic period and based on issues characteristic of a romantic mentality, and developed through the nineteenth century, under the influence of evolving French scholarly thought in all human sciences and Germanic scholarship. This meant exploring the works of scholars prior to Gaston Paris to identify where he found his ideas, with which intellectual tradition he was debating, and how he solved problems identified by romantic scholars in the early nineteenth century. In this sense, I attempted a historical sketch of Paris's theories rather than a simple criticism of his work based on his texts and the alleged historical and literary trends that inspired it.⁴

ages as subject and object"; Glencross, *Reconstructing Camelot*; Keller, *The Middle Ages reconsidered*.

³ Bloch and Nichols, "Introduction" to *Medievalism and the modernist temper*, 4.

⁴ What I tried to do in this book differs, for example, from new medievalists' writings (such as Bloch's "Mieux vaut jamais que tard," Hult's "Gaston Paris and the invention of courtly love," and Gumbrecht's "Un souffle d'Allemagne ayant passé"). In these, authors concentrated on Paris's text and speculated about the immediate inspiration for them (for example, Gaston Paris' dispute with his father in terms of an Oedipal conflict, and his aim to emulate Germanic scholarship) without considering the previous lines of literary criticism of medieval texts started decades before Paris even started writing about medieval literature.

The central problem in modern work of medievalism is that in authors' desire for a more accurate and less prejudiced analysis of medieval studies (a desire similar to that of nineteenth-century medievalists), new medievalists have claimed they could assess the works of earlier scholars and eliminate prejudices by understanding why they produced work as they did. Of course, this claim itself has been debated for a few years. Yet no academic until now has attempted to engage with the new medievalist discourse in re-evaluating their work on Gaston Paris. The problems of criticising nineteenth-century medievalism while proceeding to modern literary criticism and analysis are multiple. First, a modern academic may well identify the root of a nineteenth-century problem (for example the treatment of primary sources such as the *fabliaux*), yet not be able to escape the fact that modern editions of medieval texts are inevitably based on some nineteenth-century work. Second, academics may be aware of the problem of using methods of earlier works and yet still reproduce the misconceptions of previous generations of medievalists (for example academics still use the hypothesis that the *fabliaux* come from India). Third, in using modern theoretical approaches (such as Freudian psychoanalysis), modern academics may be looking at the nineteenth century anachronistically, seeing things that were not necessarily there. Fourth, modern work may fail to study nineteenth-century medievalism in depth, focusing on famous quotes and minor works which do not illustrate the true significance of an academic's output. Fifth, modern studies may highlight aspects of an academic's work that were not of great importance in the nineteenth century.

Here, I have shown how French scholarship in medieval studies in the late nineteenth century sought its legitimacy in distinguishing itself from the knowledge produced by previous generations of French scholars. Scholars like Gaston Paris and Paul Meyer aimed to make their discipline more scientific by using what they considered recognised scientific methods by German scholars and by linking their discipline, or at least the methodology which underpinned it, to that of natural sciences. This is where the scholarly production of nineteenth-century medievalists found its unity, despite the fact that sometimes the ways through which scholars conducted their research and produced their work varied immensely. The importance of this book is to show that it was not positivism (or "scientific-positivism", or "philological positivism", as some call it) that gave unity to the academic production of late nineteenth-century French medievalists; nor was it their romanticism (since they often failed to be positivistic as they had claimed). What gave unity to the academic production of late nineteenth-century medievalists was their use of former

French knowledge and scholarship and new scientific methods in order to create a past for their own France and a notion of total science in European academia. As such, French scholars at the time reconstructed not only the Middle Ages, but medievalism itself.

I would like to repeat that the alleged combination of romanticism and positivism found in Paris's work (and that of his contemporaries) is not to be overestimated. The lack of a clear methodology for handling literary and textual analysis created a problematic environment in French academia, whereby scholars were eager to be recognised as scientific while they could not always solve the problems they found in their investigations using only philology and a scientific-positivistic methodology. The truth is that in terms of epistemology and methodology, romanticism and positivism in human sciences were less elastic terms than academics have depicted them to be over the past 40 years. Rather than producing what Cerquiglini and Aarsleff saw as a conscious "synthesis" of romanticism and positivism, nineteenth-century scholars inadvertently combined both methodologies unsuccessfully, and, as a result, they produced a large number of works on literary and textual criticism which were easy targets for criticism in the early twentieth century. But their intentions and the nature of their investigation, along with most of the methodology they used, fall into the category of what we call "philological" or "scientific-positivistic."

The study of nineteenth-century scholars makes clear not only that several issues regarding medieval literature, its origins, audience and aesthetic values are still unsolved, but also that methodological issues first raised in the nineteenth century regarding the ways to treat medieval literature (in editions or manuscripts) are still unresolved. The value of positivism, for example, discarded in some countries as an imaginary instrument of scientific objectivity in human sciences in the early twentieth century remains a strong influence in countries such as Brazil and Italy, where the positivistic tradition mutated into new forms of scholarship. In particular, the importance of romanticism (in all its aspects) in creating an image of France and the medieval past has been overlooked, or worse, regarded as superseded when it should have been studied in depth so as to understand to what extent scholars in the nineteenth century were romantics, in the sense that romanticism became a blanket term to describe any approach in which a certain degree of subjectivity was accepted and even welcome. Likewise, if it is easy today to criticise nineteenth-century positivism for its gross errors concerning literary sources, at the same time it is difficult not to acknowledge that academics in the humanities have become increasingly aware of the subjective nature

of their work, and that they often do produce theories that are valid but not perfect, in theory distancing themselves from other sciences and the search for a “factual truth.” As long as debate and dialogue go on, a scholarly work is valid, even if there are flaws in it.

The very search for factual truth has been, since the growth of literary criticism in the early twentieth century, highly debated. Academics realised that even with the most precise methodology and schematic procedures of philological analysis, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find objective truth in human sciences. In this sense, academics since the *École des Annales* in the 1930s have dismissed the work of positivistic scholars of the late nineteenth century as providing little insight into human studies. Now, in the era of postmodernism, Bédier is often hailed as the one who saved literary and textual criticism from the philological positivism of the nineteenth century, thus overlooking the fact that certain aspects of Gaston Paris’s theories work were losing popularity in the early twentieth century, even before Bédier’s work. Gaston Paris’s contribution, which today is reduced to his creation of the concept of courtly love and ludicrous theories regarding the origins of *Tristan et Iseut*, the *fabliaux* and the medieval epic, is regarded as important only to the extent that it allows us to see that the rise of philological positivism was linked with the institutionalisation of medieval studies in nineteenth-century France. Yet, as we have seen, both of these assertions are problematic, because Paris’s positivism was not as positivistic as he would have liked, and the institutionalisation of medieval studies was already underway when his generation took over French academia. In this sense, perhaps the most important part of Gaston Paris’s work for us is not his methodology, which now seems dated, but rather the stereotypes of the Middle Ages and medieval literature which he created (the national character of the epic, the Indian origin of the *fabliaux*, and the Celtic root of the Arthurian cycle), and which remain influential in modern studies of medieval culture. Paris has shown the value of using memory, of tapping into the rich elements of the national past to bring solace from the troubles of his time, and, in so doing, he also contributed to furthering a sense of community in late nineteenth-century France.

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